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THE North American Review

FAMILY HAPPINESS

Stories by Judith Beth Cohen
John Druska
James Hall
Mark Halliday
George V. Higgins
Tamara Kennelly
Denis Johnson
Catherine Petroski
Blossom Shaw
Pamela Painter Skeen

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The North American Review

FEATURE

13 Family Happiness: Stories by 10 Authors

14 Triangles, *by Judith Beth Cohen*
18 The Meatcutter's Family, *by John Druska*
24 Hibernation, *by James Hall*
28 Mrs. Hungate's Question, *by Mark Halliday*
31 Two Donnelly Stories, *by George V. Higgins*
38 The Third Wheel, *by Tamara Kennelly*
43 Tattoos and Music, *by Denis Johnson*
49 Rings, *by Catherine Petroski*
52 We're Both Still Here, *by Blossom Shaw*
56 Night Game, *by Pamela Painter Skeen*

OTHER FICTION

62 American Stamps, *by William McMillen*

POETRY

17 Uncle Ezra on Rainy Days, *by Thomas McAfee*
23 Father, *by Catherine Savage Brosman*
48 22 October, *by John Judson*
58 Mummies & Others, *by David Ray*
59 Talking Books, *by Felix Pollak*
Hog, *by Richard Grossman*
60 Burning the Steaks in the Rain, *by Robert Dana*
66 Rutledge Youngblood Refuses to Lie under the Banyan Tree Any More, *by Everette Maddox*

DEPARTMENTS

4 American Eye: LETTER FROM FAIRBANKS, *by John Morgan*
7 Another Man's Poison: O CALIFORNIA!, *by Kenneth Lash*
9 Smalltalk: HEY, IS ANYONE LISTENING?, *by Stephen Minot*
67 Books & Authors: CHRISTINA STEAD—DARK PLACES OF THE HEART, *by Judith Kegan Gardiner;* AN UGLY JOKE—DEAD BABIES, *by Diane McWhorter*
74 Synecdoche: BRIEF POETRY NOTICES
76 Film: STARS AND OTHER MAGNITUDES, *by Lawrence Sturhahn*

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John Morgan

Letter from Fairbanks

The leaves on the aspen and birch trees have already yellowed, many have fallen. It's mid-September as I write, and within a week the trees will be bare. By October 1st, snow is expected, and after that winter will be with us till the end of April. Long-term residents tell us it's not the cold or even the dark, but the length of the winter that gets people down. "Cabin fever" is the name of the syndrome. It breaks up marriages and is a contributing factor to the homicide rate here, one of the highest in the nation.

The frontier atmosphere is relished and exaggerated, and relatively large modern structures like the new Teamster clinic and recreation hall get their log cabin facades. The Teamsters are here, as everyone knows, for the pipeline. Fairbanks, the most northerly city of its size (50,000) in the country, is the administrative and supply center for pipeline construction. Workers on leave from their camps along the route come here to blow their pay on liquor and women and gambling, just as panners did in the old gold-mining days. Gold built this town in the first place, and now that pipeline construction is beginning to slacken off, local boosters are looking ahead to the gasline that will inevitably follow, for there is gas in Prudhoe Bay as well as oil. The route of the gasline is up for grabs, and if it goes through Canada, as now seems likely, Fairbanks, dependent as it has always been on the wealth of the earth, may not have much of a future.

But for now the pipeline boom is still on. The mystique of the pipeline has certainly been felt outside, but it's strongest here in Alaska, where a doctor working in the Teamster clinic prefers to say, without embellishment, that he works "on the pipeline." And one wonders if the *News-Miner* isn't exaggerating just a bit in its daily stories of murders, muggings, and police raids on gambling houses and houses of prostitution. Just yesterday, Governor Jay Hammond (who has the physique of a woodsman and wears a woodsman's beard) announced a "crisis in law enforcement" and volunteered the use of state troopers to patrol the streets. The city fathers thanked the governor but felt such extraordinary measures were not necessary.

If, as an early morning stroll down Second Avenue will reveal, drunkenness *is* a problem, the City Council has a measure before it that would help. There are currently no restrictions at all on bar hours. The new law would close them at two a.m. Opposition from tavern owners has been fierce.

Yet this is all part of the mystique, and it would be wrong to imply that a rough frontier atmosphere dominates the town. The governor wouldn't have come at all except that Fairbanks is the second largest population center in the state. By daylight the downtown area, with a Penney's, a Woolworth's, a Sears "catalog center," its streets recently re-directed one-way to accomodate increasing traffic, resembles any number of nondescript Midwestern American towns. For it is the Midwest, rather than the West Coast or Canada, which Fairbanks under this unusually sunny fall most closely resembles. There are more churches here than bars, and if an Ozark twang is often heard among those associated with the pipeline, the accent most common among the more permanent residents is Midwestern.

In 1940, the population was about twelve thousand. Most of those have now moved out or died, and you rarely run into anyone who was actually born here. A typical resident may come from small-town Iowa, or the Dakotas, and local speech reflects this derivation. "Have a nice day," the lady behind the counter in Penney's will tell you even at four in the afternoon with the day mostly gone. "Have a nice day," says the serviceman at a local Texaco as you pull away from the pump.

But nothing in Iowa or the Dakotas resembles the stunning white-capped peaks of the Alaska Range, rising on clear days like a marvelous mirage to the south. Mt. McKinley, a hundred and fifty miles away, reaches 20,000 feet higher than the flat Tanana Valley in which Fairbanks lies. And of course nothing in the "lower forty-eight" matches the spectacular auroral displays which even in August this year filled the night sky with pulsating beacons of green and white.

Nor does even a Dakota winter match the 60 and 70 below temperatures we can expect here. Preparations have already begun. Cars must be "winterized," which in addition to changing to an extremely light oil means the installation of a "circulating heater." Operating off electric current, these devices keep the engine fifty degrees or so warmer than the outside air while the car sits overnight. Lots around town include a "plug-in" attached to each meter. A car left to stand just two or three hours at fifty below and without the heater would be unlikely to start.

Of course we worry about ourselves as well as our car. Warm parkas, down mittens, and 'Sorel' boots with replaceable felt liners will be needed. Those liners help ward off the dampness which contributes to frostbite. As soon as you get inside, we're told, take your liners out and put them next to the electric heater to dry.

Now the fall air is crisply clear, but by mid-winter (reflecting the fragile ecology of such a northerly location) ice-fog will be upon us. In the windless conditions which prevail here at extremely low temperatures all the water vapor in the air (fed by car exhausts) freezes and sits, held down in a temperature inversion by an even colder layer of arctic air above. Added to the twenty-hour nights, the ice fog reduces visibility to a matter of feet. On icy roads in the fog, accidents are the rule. No wonder many insurers are quitting the area.

* * *

"No studded snowtires allowed before September 15," says the sign as we start our drive up the Steese Highway. Eleven miles north, the Elliott Highway

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branches off, and here the pipeline begins. Sections of pipe are stacked not far from the road, and the long serpentine belly—more impressive in this wide hilly landscape than one had expected—moves off toward Deadhorse and Prudhoe Bay. It seems alien here because it is so completely modern, so rigid and purposeful as it lies on this spruce-covered land. At peak construction, the pipeline employed some 21,000 workers, but the number is smaller than that now, and when completed it will require fewer than five hundred to monitor and maintain it—or so say its sponsors, assuming no doubt that the welds will hold.

Ten miles further along, having diverged from the pipeline, we come to Cleary Summit (2,233 feet), from which McKinley is dimly visible. Fairbanks, in its valley, has sunk from view, and now the vastness of this state becomes apparent. Only an occasional radar installation or ski lodge out here. Mostly just miles of spruce, aspen, and birch. After a while the highway is a wide single lane of dirt.

We come to an "Historical Marker," pull off the road, and have lunch. A thick section of rusted pipe calls back an earlier period of boom. In the Twenties, a large-scale construction effort produced the Davidson Ditch and Pipeline through which over three million gallons of water an hour were diverted to gold mining dredges forty miles away. At that time millions and millions of dollars in gold were pumped out of the land.

Further on there are occasional campgrounds, and highway crews wet down the road which has suffered in the current drought. We are heading toward the Yukon River (though we won't make it that far on this trip), and only northern Maine in our experience resembles this wooded vacancy.

Gradually trees give way to a hilly tundra. Wayside parking areas mark hiking trails. Sixty-six miles out, Miracle Mile Roadhouse is the farthest north access point to the Chatanika River canoe trail. The Chatanika is a class 2 (medium difficult) stream. Canoeists are warned to watch for low overhanging trees, log jams, and fast white water. For these risks they may be rewarded with the sight of a moose, come down to the stream to drink.

Up at Eagle Summit—five hours out of town and as far as we can go if we're to get back by nightfall—we scan the tundra for migrating caribou, but don't see any. With the vegetation already turning, the reddish-brown hills stretch like a carpet for many miles in all directions. People come here on June 21, to watch the sun fail to set at midnight. The tundra is spongey underfoot. At 3600 feet the air is cool even in late August, and the distances covered by the eye are vast. Far to the north—more miles than we can quite grasp—lies the shadowy Brooks Range, visible on clear days—or so a sign claims. What we see are probably some intervening hills. To see the Brooks Range from here would be like standing on top of the World Trade Center and seeing on the horizon the Washington Monument. That's the scale of things in Alaska.

* * *

We'd received many warnings about mosquitoes which swarm up from the bogs when the snow melts in spring, but I'm happy to report that by mid-August when we got here, the worst of the season was past.

* * *

The price of gas in Fairbanks ranges from seventy-seven to eighty-five cents a gallon, depending on type and grade. Even when the pipeline begins to operate, the price won't drop, since the oil has to be sent outside for refining. Milk is a dollar a quart, and a ten minute consultation with a pediatrician will run the parent twenty-four dollars. A 'Big Mac,' at $1.05, may be the best food buy in town.

* * *

Whenever Anchorage comes into the conversation around here, you can be pretty sure that the likelihood of another earthquake which, like the one in 1964, will utterly decimate that (warmer, larger) city will be raised.

* * *

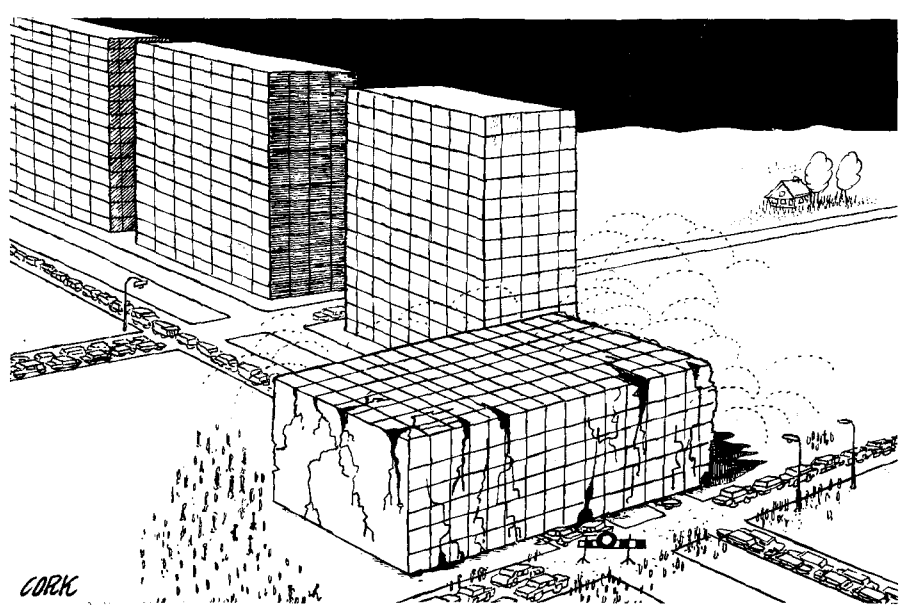
Item: a creative writing teacher at the university leaves his job in order to work as a supervisor on the pipeline: he can earn enough in six months to support himself, his wife, and two kids for the rest of the year while he writes his novel.

* * *

On the edge of town there is a musk-ox farm run by the university. These exotic bovines are being raised for their wonderfully soft and warm fur which the Eskimoes turn into wool for scarves and blankets. The wool is called "qiviut."

* * *

There is a constant turnover in the population here. Newcomers are frequently stopped on the street and asked directions by other newcomers. Every weekend at numerous garage sales, those leaving pass along their worldly possessions to those who have just arrived. Certainly it takes a special temperament to settle in for the long haul, but there are those who see the merits of living in a place where, only ten miles out, one can acquire land very reasonably and build a home with no neighbors in sight. Such people will tell you that properly dressed you can be warmer here than in parts of the "lower forty-eight," because when the temperature drops to fifty below there's never any wind. The ice-fog, of course, never reaches beyond the edge of town. And fluctuations give occasional days in mid-winter when the temperature rises as high as zero degrees—perfect for cross-country skiing and snow-mobiling, fine for hiking or just pottering around the yard.



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Of course in winter daylight is limited. There may be as little as three hours of it. But, say the true settlers, those gorgeous moon- and aurora-lit days are the best, when the white earth seems to give back more light than it receives from the dark sky and you live in a world made up more of spirit than of matter. Ghostly, unreal, and marvelously cold.

Newcomers may be skeptical. Bob Salter has just taken over as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the Fairbanks branch of the University of Alaska. An urban geographer, he comes here from an entirely different climate, having been an assistant dean at the University of Miami. When he flew up in June to be interviewed, he had to switch planes in Chicago, and as he tells it, a rather sullen-looking young man got on with him at O'Hare and took a seat just in front. As the plane was taxiing out to the runway, the young man jumped up and cried, "No, I can't do it! I can't go back!" The plane turned around and returned to the gate. A pipefitter, the young man had spent the past two years working on the line.

* * *

Tomorrow, September 18, beginning at 8 a.m., the Equinox Marathon will take place. The 135 entrants will start out at Patty Field and will proceed uphill for thirteen miles to the top of Ester Dome, an altitude gain of two thousand feet, then return to the field. Only the Pike's Peak run is considered tougher. We are losing sunlight now at a rate of seven minutes per day. In a few weeks the rivers will freeze up and the ground will be covered with snow. From then on it will be uphill into late March or April, when the winter finally turns around.

A JANUARY POSTSCRIPT:

As the days shortened down to a couple of hours around the middle of December, even at noon the sun lay barely above the horizon. It would rise to the southeast at about ten in the morning and struggle along the top of the southern mountains for a few hours, setting by one-thirty in the afternoon. We missed the full brilliance of day, living instead through extended dawns which merged into long beautiful sunsets. It was important to make the effort to get outside during those few hours, otherwise we'd lose the day entirely.

Now, in mid-January, the sun is making its return. In one way we've been lucky. While parts of the "lower forty-eight" were having one of the severest winters on record, ours has been mild. The first week in January saw temperatures rise into the thirties. One day a record high of forty degrees was registered. And though we've had occasional lows of twenty or thirty below, we've missed so far those promised weeks of minus fifty, minus sixty, minus seventy, without which we can hardly be said to have experienced a Fairbanks winter.

Not that we're complaining.

But, as in other parts of the country, the winter has been light on snow. Skiers are unhappy, and so are the "mushers." This is the season for dogsled races, but several meets have had to be cancelled due to the sparseness of snow-cover. Boulders and logs normally deeply buried at this time of year are lying exposed, dangerous obstacles for high-speed sledders.

Four inches of snow fell last week, though, and that gave the more daring racers a margin they felt safe with. In the fifteen degree warmth a large crowd gathers at the Alaskan Mushers Association racing grounds on Farmers Loop Road, north of town. Just the other day a car slammed into a moose near here—or that's the rumor we've heard. The dogs seem even more eager than their masters to get out on the ten mile course. They strain in their harnesses and some leap straight up in the air to burn off their uncontrollable energy while the starter counts down the last few seconds and half a dozen people holding back the sled struggle against the pull of the dogs so they won't leave the starting post early. And then on "Go!" instantly the twelve dogs spring smoothly forward, the musher behind his sled on the runners, his post number pinned in large green numerals to the back of his parka. Within a matter of seconds they're starting to make a wide curve at the far end of the field. With distance they shrink to a dark silhouette—the dogs in pairs, the sled and musher—against the snow. Soon they disappear into the woods.

Racing against time ("electronically clocked"), a new sled starts out from the post every two minutes. The dogs, bred for speed, are much smaller and sleeker than the usual huskie, though occasionally a larger dog—looking like a sheep among wolves—will have made the team. Women compete with men as mushers, and local businesses sponsor individual competitors who have the expense of raising and training as many as fifteen dogs. The dogs are not pets by any means. They're penned outside through the cold winters, lest they go soft and lose the competitive edge.

And now, thirty minutes later, with sleds still starting off at two minute intervals, the voice on the loud speaker directs our attention to the edge of the woods, where the first of the returning teams has just emerged, dogs still straining forward, their master directing them with oral commands to which they respond as readily as well trained horses to a rein. Tongues flapping at the sides of their mouths, they cross the finish line smoothly and with little noticeable slackening of pace from their opening burst. The first sled to come in is timed at thirty-five minutes, thirty-four hundredths of a minute. The second sled covered the ten miles more quickly by half a minute and brings in what will prove to be the best time of the day. As we start for home, the sun, which had been a yellow spotlight glaring out of the southern sky, has paled and softened, and the clouds to the southwest are tinted orange.

* * *

Almost half a year in Alaska. We've eaten moose roast and caribou stew. A few weeks ago we were wakened out of sleep by a small earthquake. It came through like a shockwave, rattling everything in the apartment and even the building itself, but causing no damage.

That same week we saw the most spectacular display of Northern Lights since our arrival. We noticed it as we came out of a restaurant after dinner: at first several thick ropes of light looping around the sky. We'd seen that kind of thing before, but tonight it was going on all over the sky—not just one or two strands of light but many. One main loop circled back on itself and broke in half, and these in turn lengthened and snaked across the sky. It's this restlessness, the constant looping and shifting, that one is least prepared for. As we watched, one of the strands of light began to shimmer. It dropped closer to the earth and took on a veil-like transparency, a radiant curtain of light with folds of pale pink, white, and metallic green. A few minutes later the aurora had receded deep into the sky and stood almost motionless, branching like a vast tree against a vaster backdrop of stars. The cold was beginning to get to us now, and we went inside, but hours later the Northern Lights were still active in the sky.

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Kenneth Lash

O California!

Bartleby's Book of Unfamiliar Quotations:

—*Humans have motives, not reasons.*
Ex: a) an ulcer is an interior motive. b) faith is an overfed hunger, c) in the country of the blind, there are no whales.

—*In self-consciousness begins self-absorption.*
Rx: a) polygamy, b) polyandry, c) not allowing the crew ashore on the California coast, d) howling at Rev. Moon, e) transcendental medication.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Travels with Abraham:

☞ In Watsonville, California, artichokes are 5¢ each. Twenty-eight miles down the road they are 30¢. My first economics professor—aptly named Norman Buck—ascribed such differentials to what he called "place utility." A farmer I spoke with called it highway robbery.

☞ Further down the coast highway, at the outskirts of a small town, a convalescent home perches on the west side of the highway; directly across from it sits a mortuary. Further instances of place utility? Or of Aesop's Reynard the Fox?

☞ Tom Wolfe's Los Angeles piece, a celebration of hot dogs-and-pop architecture is campy and salable, like vending toy trumpets on Judgment Day. Life in L.A. is 1/3 cars—in all their aspects of beauty, incivility, and reckless consumption of time. Yet the sea washes, the sailboat spinnakers belly, the bougainvillaea camellia palm and bird of paradise do in their shapes and colors proclaim an earthly reason.

☞ The J. Paul Getty Museum of art in Malibu commemorates more than it does life's creativity its grinding production of the materials of irony. J. Paul left it the bulk of his fortune (having as most of the great rich more faith in objects than in people; and having also a kindred relationship with the world of art by reason of a grandson's ear getting cut off). With one posthumous stroke he made his museum the most richly endowed in the world. In terms of money. In terms of art it is poor, but pretentious. Reproductions of ancient statuary (including ancient reproductions of ancient statuary), a back-of-the-shop collection of Flemish

paintings, a possible Uccello. All in all, a poor show. Interesting if you think of *Jaws*, of the art-world sharks that tore their piece off that irresistible leg. But there's one work of art that is so fine it excuses all the rest—the setting on a hillside overlooking the ocean, great grounds of eucalyptus, marvelous gardens and streams, even the fountains in the reproduced Roman villa. Under a mild California sun a stroll, an amble, through that setting is a lovely, fragrant thing. The place is the art, the gardeners the artists, at the Getty.

☞ Going back north, in the coastal range between Ojai and Santa Barbara, is the Los Padres National Park, which is from an automobile simply a nice stretch of wooded mountain, more notable for what is not there than for what is. But at its fringe and beyond are what you could call orange groves. If you were being inadequate. Great rounded hills rising one beyond the other, the way we were shown to draw hills in grade school and grew to see unfailingly as breast-like. These are closer to Uccello landscape, with the childlike delight in tricks of distorted perspective, mysteries of shadow, bursts of light here and there and there. Entirely planted in orange trees. Thousands upon thousands of orange trees sometimes marching up the hills, sometimes dotted down the sides; young ones, their trunks protected with white wrappings; older ones with that imperious green against which the delight of orange hangs like Original Surprise.

☞ The Santa Barbara Biltmore is a low, rambling hotel of gardens and ocean front, fireplaces and thick bath towels, high ceilings and real walls—walls, that is, not constructed of sound-enhancing materials, which in our holidays, ramadas, qualities, fix us in the middle of adjoining sex lives and television programs (often indistinguishable). Nonetheless, this already reminiscent inn, unwilling to risk failure in its function of providing a night's rest (perhaps via open windows), turns off its cable television connection at 11:30. The screen goes blank, the sound goes off. That's what I call a blow for civilization.

☞ Early morning on a stretch of Santa Barbara beach a German Shepherd, a Great Dane, and a dingle of small dogs were playing frisbee. The Shepherd always caught it. He had developed an uncanny eye for the sudden hesitation of the frisbee toward the end of its flight, and he could twist in mid-air like Hareem Abdul Bulbul of the Boise Basketeers. The Dane was by the time I arrived melancholy. Tired, simply not in it, he lolloped over for a pat, a few

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reassuring words. This exaggeration of dog. I was reminded of a time years ago, driving around England's Lake Country at night, less lost than wandering, surprised to find the rain become a storm, lights out in all the dwellings, no inn. Coming upon one at last, but darkened, only a faint light somewhere in back. Nevertheless constrained to try, very tired and abandoned-feeling. The front had a kind of extended, enclosed entryway, a storm corridor perhaps. Unlit. I entered, struck a match, found a knocker and knocked. Waited in silence. After a drawn-out time the door suddenly, silently opened and I found myself looking *at an exact level* into the eyes of a Great Dane. "Take care, Watson!" I cried silently, extending an arm backwards. At which point the Dane, now seen by flashlight as a harlequin and two steps above, abruptly sat down and let his tongue lap out the side of his mouth. It seemed there would be a vacancy.

☞ San Francisco's latest wonder is the Hyatt Regency, a high hotel down near the Ferry building. It features an enclosed inner court cathedral style—Chartres cathedral, for example. The soaring empty space goes all the way to the top (20 storeys). Rooms go off balconied walks, the continuous railings of which feature large movable flower pots containing vines that dangle five or ten floors already, and could (but don't) constitute an art form more valid than any crosscountry Christo. The vines are accompanied by recorded birdsong (yes, Your Majesty, I do not lie). The open space has a triangular, pie-shaped feeling, and as it rises hugely to a narrowing point of skylight successfully achieves the sensation of acrophobia *while you stand at the bottom of it*. A fine dizziness for you standing right there on the ground floor. Glass wall-attached elevators rise up and down in their thermometers, the bottom bulbs decorated in baroque lighting like tulip glass. Around the ground of this Gothic lobby are shops: furs, emeralds, souvenirs and cigars. In the middle are a restaurant, a cocktail lounge. A flat square fountain featuring a sheet of water, tautly drawn, so fitted and perfect that none can resist poking a finger into it. It is in fact real water, gently sliding down the sides of its stone container without a ripple, without a wrinkle, in its inner flatness. Across from it is what seems at first a plastic Christmas tree. Huge, lighted. It is in fact an audio "sculpture," its lights reacting to noise change. We all stand around it, waiting our turn to give one good clap.

☞ Across the bay from San Francisco is a hillside community, houses perched up from the water as if for birds. And this is about a bird. A sparrow in Sausalito. Sausalito ("little willow thicket" in Portuguese) is formed of such natural beauty of hill, sky, water, and view of nighttime San Francisco afloat across the bay that nothing seems able to uglify it, though much has been attempted. Including an untoward percentage of unpleasant-looking people out to make capital of their carefully overstated freakiness, and great clots of tourists happily coming by boat bus and foot to the zoo, to feed them. Ten years ago I would have voted that the Board of Health close the place. Now I find the exhibitionism grown aged, used to itself, relaxed. Now the tourists arrive mostly by ferry from San Francisco, and getting there is half the fun. Ferry is the one happy form of group transportation. It loosens the lines in people's faces. They absolutely *amble* down the gangplank. Smiles here, smiles there. I was waiting to meet someone at the landing, an ordinary afternoon, a bit misty. Sitting on a wooden bench eating a (Swensen's) icecream cone, quiet except for a few gulls, when along comes a sparrow. A plain, very plain, sparrow, hippity hopping. Up onto the bench, toward me. Stopped. Sat. Stared. At the icecream cone. I picked off a small piece, put it down. The sparrow picked it up. Crunch crunch crunch. Gone. Sat. Stared. I picked off another piece. Held it out to drop it. Hop! He/she took it out of my fingers. I sat there and fed the sparrow the whole damn half of cone that was left, the bird feeding from my fingers that were dripping with the neglected (Turkish mocha) icecream. When it was finished the sparrow carefully cleaned its beak against the wooden slats of the bench, sat a moment, then left. I wondered if it could still fly, so full of sugarcone. It could. Now the point of all this is not that I am St. Francis nor was meant to be. The point is that a sparrow could become so easy with people, so safe and comfortable and (without doubt) well-fed, in Sausalito. It says something for that town. (Which certainly bears no sign proclaiming it "a wonderful place to grow.")

☞ Up along the northern coast is Mendocino county, great craggy bluffs along the way, the ill-named Pacific thrashing and recoiling below. On the hills wonderful stands of trees. Redwoods. Bishop pines, red-barked madrone. This is lumbering country, almost without natural ports. The boats used to stand off Point Arena, be loaded with lumber by a system of pulleys. But there are many mild land spots among the ruggedness. Rhododendrons, fuchsia, hummingbirds. Brooks and rivers shaded under the quiet trees, sunlight filtered and falling through like mist. The smell of a foot-thick ground cover of pine needles. You can recline on a hillside in gently-lit shade, lightly warmed coolness, and hear the seals barking. Sometimes a dog answers. Twelve years ago a friend and I began the long, slow process of buying some acreage there by installment. We dreamed of retirement homes, a couple of cabins for our families before then. Now we are told only one house can be built there. The county-state-coastal commission says so. Can we sell off a part? No. One house. But we have twenty-one acres? One house. What happens: do you give each of us a hammer, some boards and nails, choose a starting line, shoot off the county cannon, and whichever of us gets to the land first gets to build his house? About like that, yes, you might say it amounts to that. You call that civilized? That's right, Mister; isn't conservation civilized? That depends. I was a charter supporter of the Sierra Club when I lived in California. Who wouldn't have been? Being against real estate developers was at least as holy as being against the National Rifle Association or the AMA. So the Sierra Club flourished, grew in power. It influenced county zoning laws, gradually, bit by bit. Then it met with the government of Jerry Brown, a marriage made in heaven. The immaculate child is *power*. Called the California Coastal Commission, which tells us we can build on our own land *nothing* without its permission; one house to a parcel of land whether one acre or fifty, whether bought

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Inside the Iowa Writers Workshop
The Shifting Image of A. Hitler

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and owned by one person or two or four or . . . . In short, conservation become confiscation. Now that's very smart. I've always maintained that short of putting all public parks in the desert or in Alaska, the only effective form of land conservation is that it be owned by the wealthy. If the public owns it, you have Coney Island or Yellowstone. The wealthy keep it unpopulated (except by themselves), unbuilt, clean. The rest of us can drive by and look at it. Only the wealthy will be able to afford the taxes on large acreage. The developer has given way to the dictator. No mediating appeal to such reason as, say, one house on five acres to preserve openness but allow reasonable use. No. The California Coastal Commission was, when I left, about to send up a U-2 spy plane, photo reconnaissance, to photograph the entire coast from Mexico to Oregon. Nothing will be built that *they* won't know about. Wasn't that spy-plane fellow's name Power or Powers?

☞ I call California the Instant Gratification State. Its enviable lead in the consumption of Mercedes-Benz and macadamia nuts is now o'ershadowed by its world leadership in the consumption (and thus production) of psycho-spiritual persons, things, and activities. California residents have turned the psycho-spiritual into (hopefully) the last great consumer item. (As San Francisco turned the Golden Gate Bridge into the last great leap downward for mankind.) They buy it like Iowans buy beef. You can get your therapy screaming screwing or sitting, in mud or on a mountain, in a business building or a house or a field or a cave or on top of a delicatessen; in any weight or cut of hours days years, at any price except cheap. They gobble it up. Their depths require instant quelling, presumably so their heights can be reached. Esalen started it. Now it's spiritual cracker-jacks. As far as I can tell, once started nobody stops. They just go on from one flavor to another. The market is marvelous. Spiritual capitalism has crooked a finger into the old building that once slowly and ever so stringently issued passports to heaven. The new priests are merciful, concerned with human rights and equality: no one refused, no waiting.

> When, in disgrace with fortune
> and men's eyes;
> I all alone beweep my outcast
> state . . .
> Haply I think on thee,
> Fritz, Sam, Erhard, Gerta . . . . □

Stephen Minot

Hey, Is Anyone Listening?

When a troupe of actors discover they are playing to an empty house, they cancel the show. Oh, there may be some muttered obscenities, some shuffling of feet, some half-hearted talk about the show going on, but it won't. Actors are a dedicated lot, but they aren't crazy.

When poets and writers with high literary standards discover that they have no readers out there, their first move is to deny the facts. Earnestly. Then they run to a foundation for support.

This is a difficult statement to make not only because it describes some of my best friends but because it applies to me as well. In fact, I am presently the grateful—truly grateful—recipient of a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. It's paying the mortgage and a hunk of the fuel bill while I teach part time, write fiction, and take time to study the great American tradition of grant-giving.

There's a certain logic here: at least my views can't be written off as sour grapes. They are not steeped in bitterness. I'm appreciative. I'm also uneasy.

This may be an open letter to Leonard Randolph, the Director of the Literature Program which distributes grants. Nothing personal, Mr. Randolph; it's just that I think we should revise the whole set of priorities by which we hand out funds for the arts.

It has been four years since Harvey Swados wrote that grim article which appeared shortly after his death in the *New York Times* Book Section, January 21, 1973. It should be required reading for all writers, poets, teachers of writers and poets, and foundation personnel.

He laments the fact that his students do not read little magazines. What fiction they do see is in anthologies and paperbacks. And where do they plan to publish?

> . . . in the quarterlies and little magazines which few read regularly and to which none subscribes. One gets the impression that for them these periodicals exist, not because of any intellectual or spiritual commitment on the part of their editors or readers, but rather as a kind of neutral repository for creative efforts. . . .

Now, four years later, I see no change. Here are some solid—though admittedly non-statistical—facts which I consider each time another story of mine appears in a little magazine.

—I have not met an undergraduate student in the past decade who has ever subscribed to a little magazine before taking my writing courses.

—I have not discovered a single colleague in the English Department of the college at which I teach who has ever subscribed to a little magazine publishing fiction or poetry.

—The city of Hartford, Connecticut, has a population of 158,017, is the state capital, is the home of more than five colleges and universities, and does not have a single bookstore or newsstand which will sell a single literary quarterly on a regular basis.

—Although colleagues and students assure me that they make use of the periodical room of our library, and although our library subscribes to every periodical I have appeared in, not once in eighteen years has anyone on this campus ever said, "Hey, I saw your story in. . . ."

Odd.

I am reminded of a television panel discussion I took part in one Sunday morning. It was a taped, professionally produced, publicized production on a commercial station. I was brazen enough to poll a large number of my colleagues the next day. "Oh, by the way. . . ." No one had seen it. Even my wife missed it. My two sons. As for me, something came up and I just forgot.

So much for television's Sunday-morning intellectual ghetto. It has no audience. Zero. Zilch. The cameras grind on, the airways are filled, "culture quotas" are met, but the sets are turned off.

So I learned my lesson. Never again. But I do go on appearing in little maga-

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zines. Why? Because, I tell myself, sometimes these stories are reprinted in *Best Stories of*——or in anthologies for college use which real people read. And at least once a publisher took a chance with my little-magazine fiction and printed a paperback collection.

This is what I say when pressed, but my real motivation is less defensible than that, less rational. I do it because except in rare moments of lucidity I convince myself that little magazines have an audience.

They do, of course, in a manner of speaking. Three-thousand for this one, fifteen-hundred for that. Mostly writers like myself, I suspect. A few junior editors. Scattered across a nation, this may mean that for any one magazine there will be five readers in my home state of Connecticut and another seven in an adjoining state. We'll never meet. We'll never discuss what we read, never share our reactions.

We few subscribers are reduced like whales to scattered pods; we are no longer a viable population. We may call out across spaces as I am doing now, but we do not enrich each other. It is a large and chilly sea.

Such is the state of affairs for most writers of fiction. What's life like for the poet?

Feeling strong? Read *Coda*. Read *what? Coda* is the most informed, most carefully researched newsletter for poets and writers. It covers contest deadlines, publication statistics, grants, information on little presses and little magazines. Its May 1976 issue reported that the Walt Whitman Award competition received 1,475 manuscripts from which one collection of verse was selected. With odds like that, how could they miss? Yet the sales of the winning collection, excepting libraries, came to a stunning 1,500. In that case, for every practicing poet who put together a decade or more of work there was one—count them, *one*—reader.

That's the sound of one hand clapping.

* * *

Another statistic: *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* is reported by *Coda* as having received 10,500 individual poems from 1,875 contributors in 1975. And how many subscribers? Just 520. Three submitters for every subscriber.

This isn't tragic, it's crazy. Writers of "serious," "literary" fiction and poetry are guilty of some astonishing delusions about which they are very reluctant to talk. The plain fact is that there's more of us up here on the stage than there are out there in the audience.

* * *

Like paranoids everywhere, we have our list of little green men who are masterminding this whole evil plot. We expose them endlessly and on every possible occasion—in class, in print, at writers' conferences. Indeed, this may be the primary function of writers' conferences. Here is a partial list:

1. Claim: It's the fault of publishers. If they were intelligent, educated men they would publish good fiction and poetry. (Haunting reminder: intelligent, educated publishers of subsidized presses like Illinois and Pittsburgh do publish good fiction and poetry and they lose a bundle. Whose fault is that?)

2. Claim: It's the fault of magazine editors. How come you can write good stuff for a decade and still not place it? (Late night second thought: how many people do I know who would read it if it were accepted? Let's see now, how many of my friends actually subscribe to more than one literary magazine? How many do *I* subscribe to? Well, I just don't have time.)

3. Claim: It's all the fault of high printing costs and high retail prices of books and magazines. (Sobering fact: the relative cost of a hardcover book and a fifth of good Scotch has remained more or less constant over the past three decades.)

4. Claim: The National Endowment ought to hand out more money for us ignored writers. (Counter-question: You want to increase the number of poetry manuscripts submitted each year from 3,250 to 6,000? To 50,000?)

I too have mouthed these complaints, but they just don't make sense. The absurdity of it all struck me while I was attending the Book Affair in Cambridge last year. It was a great gathering and display of little magazines and little presses put together through the backbreaking, unpaid, selfless efforts of dedicated men and women. It was an enormous act of faith. Yet there was something sad about the sight of table after table of publications which would never reach as many as 400 people—some fewer than 50. All of these were either surviving on grant money or waiting for it. Only a handful of publications represented there had managed to win enough of a following to survive as a self-supporting entity.

There were, of course, stellar exceptions. *Ploughshares* was kept afloat with foundation money and now has a fighting chance of being a viable and significant force on the literary scene. *Fiction International* was there and it certainly has hewed out an exclusive domain for itself not filled by any other publication. Other live-and-well publications included *NAR* and the *Massachusetts Review*. But the great bulk of magazines there were so minor as to have no real following, no real public need for existing. Most were the private hobbies of their editors. Not one published work which cried out for national distribution. Yet most of these editors expected public aid in the form of grants. And some were very impatient.

I was reminded of the Indian Thoreau writes about in *Walden*. He was furious because no one would buy the baskets he made.

> Thinking that when he made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man's to buy them. He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so.

Doesn't sound like Henry? Well, he went on to say that he himself had decided not to get into the selling business. His choice. But every editor I spoke to at the Book Affair *was* concerned with sales and most, like the Indian, were indignant that the public had not come running to buy their wares.

The heart of the problem as I see it is this: We who take literary creativity seriously have put the bulk of our efforts into producing more and better fiction and poetry; we have ignored to an astonishing degree the task of establishing an audience for that work.

The fault lies both with the universities and the foundations. We in the United States invented the phenomenon of the creative writing class. There were none at the turn of the century; they are now an almost required portion of every U.S. college curriculum. There are more M.A. programs in writing in 1977 than there were a decade ago and they are presently undergoing a dramatic increase in popularity. No national commission has determined that we need more writers and poets; the growth is internal and self-perpetuating. We are turning out more and more skilled literary craftsmen and craftswomen—an ever expanding tribe of basket weavers in a nation which at present prefers plastic.

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As for the foundations, I cannot fault them for financing hard-pressed writers and poets, but they are generating a backlog of hostility as these subsidized word-wizards discover that there is no market for their wares. What if we quadruple the number of poetry manuscripts submitted to the University of Pittsburgh Press each year? What have we done but quadruple the number of frustrated and embittered unpublished poets? How can we defend that kind of program to a tax-weary public? How can we defend NEA's budget against, say, HEW's?

The real risk, of course, is that the absurdity of subsidizing unwanted literary productivity will finally be made known to the wider public. What if these same doubts are raised in the pages of *Playboy?* We may find the foundations under attack even before we can effect a change in policy. There is a pressing need for a change in policy *before* the wider public begins asking the same questions Thoreau did of his Indian.

There is, I think, a reasonable solution. It is a ten-year plan. It would cost no more tax dollars. It could start next year.

The National Endowment for the Arts could establish this policy: That for a decade at least two-thirds of all foundation grants must be justified by a credible claim that such payments will create a wider audience for the arts.

Who loses? It means, first, a reduction of grants for individual writers and poets. No grants whatever for new magazines or insolvent old ones. The thrust of this policy is toward establishing a new and wider need for both fiction and poetry; eventually both writers and magazines will benefit.

How do we establish this need? There are a multitude of possible programs some of which are now in effect in small measure. Here is a sample of what could be a long list of proposals:

1. Subsidize classroom use of little magazines in high schools and colleges. This will require supporting those magazines which are at least willing to cooperate. I selected three of the top literary magazines for classroom use this year and only one (*NAR*) was interested. One of the others waited a month and then demanded pre-payment (as if the college would skip the country to save $18); the third couldn't bother to locate 15 copies. Some editors have the survival instincts of lemmings. To hell with them. These grants would go only to those publications which demonstrate a clear interest in survival by offering special rates for students, desk copies for instructors, and something resembling prompt response. Such magazines deserve a bonus grant—not merely enough to cover administrative costs, but enough to serve as a reward for finding new readers.

2. Subsidize in-class distribution organizations such as Thomas Tripp's *Exile's Return* (Box 46, Maynard, MA 01754). His self-financed service does the paperwork and offers a package of literary magazines for classroom use. Teachers can avoid the frustrations I found when I tried to deal directly with literary editors. His service deserves a grant. And there probably should be at least three such organizations operating in various parts of the country. They should be well publicized. Grant money spent in distribution plans like this would create a whole new generation of readers.

More recently into the business of distribution is The Plains Distribution Service (Box 3112, Fargo, ND 58102) which in addition to serving as an outlet for Midwestern small press books has begun putting together classroom-use packages of as many as six literary magazines, themselves primarily Midwest based.

And most recent of all, CCLM (Coordinating Council for Literary Magazines) has begun exploring "cluster" distribution schemes with help from a private foundation grant.

3. Heavy subsidy of bookmobile programs. So far, only one such bus travels about, bringing little magazines and small-press publications to campuses. If we in Hartford have not been able to buy a copy of the *Virginia Quarterly Review* or the University of Illinois short story collections or the Fiction Collective novels, that means that no one outside of New York, Cambridge, and San Francisco has. There should be a bookmobile in every state covering each campus twice each term. And they need ample funds for publicity.

4. Increase the ongoing Poets-in-Schools program. Real live poets and authors in the classroom suggest that language is something we can all enjoy and share. The present program is excellent, but it is only a start. These students are most likely to be the ones who will voluntarily buy and read the little magazines of the 1980s.

5. Support cooperatives such as the one called *Magazine*. This group has been running joint ads in the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, dividing the cost among six member-magazines. They have also been working on joint problems of distribution. Many such groups are needed to solve a variety of shared needs.

6. Support any group which is willing to present a display of literary magazines at the annual Modern Language Association regional meetings. It is simply astonishing that these gatherings which bring together tens of thousands of intelligent teachers of English had never until 1976 (when CCLM, an offshoot of the NEA, tried it in New York) been used to present journals of contemporary fiction and poetry. Scholars and writers do, after all, share the same language.

The lack of such a display to date may not be entirely accidental. Last year I was asked by the University of Illinois Press to arrange an informal display of four of their short-fiction collections at the NEMLA (New England M.L.A.) meeting in Burlington, Vermont. Since I was a member of NEMLA and was giving a paper, and was also one of the authors represented, I was sure there would be no problem. A matter of common courtesy, I thought. I was naive. All four books were promptly discarded and when I tried, unsuccessfully, to retrieve them, I was reprimanded at some length for "illegally displaying wares without paying the proper fee." Textbook publishers had paid hundreds of dollars for the privilege and who did I think I was?

7. If existing little magazines are to receive any support at all during this ten-year test period, grants should be limited to those publications which, without reducing quality, have been able to increase their circulation by 20% in any given year. Such awards should be based on their operating budget since flat grants always favor the smallest publications. Another method is to offer a matching grant of 50% of each new subscription gained during a 12-month period. In either case, awards would be restricted to those who are willing and able to find new readers.

Such a policy would bring cries of protest from some of the older publications which have grown used to the comfort of regular subsidies. But these are often the magazines which have acquired over the years an editorial arrogance which is inexcusable. One of our oldest and formerly most distinguished publications now regularly takes six months or longer to read submissions. Another describes its function in *Writer's Market* as "Mostly for academics . . . and friends and family of the editor." Such publications have renounced all claim to public support.

8. Flat grants to libraries which are willing to put on displays of little maga-

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zines complete with readings by some of the contributors.

9. Grants to daily or weekly newspapers which are willing to run short short stories of quality, as have many Italian newspapers for decades. Papers like the *Boston Globe* are already moving in this direction and need only an encouraging nudge.

10. Support for a full-time advisory finance-and-distribution team of individuals with magazine experience, the group to study the particular problems and needs of individual magazines and help editors to broaden their appeal and increase their circulation.

Doubtless there are many more routes, but the goal should be the same: establishing and maintaining a wider audience for the good fiction and poetry which we are now producing.

There is no possibility that such a program would lead to commercialism. Editors who volunteer their time to manage little magazines are not going to turn into Rupert Murdochs at the scent of grant money. For one thing, there just isn't enough. NEA's budget will always be modest by European standards. More than that, the literary community has its own well-formed values and will not sacrifice them. Change will be slow. But change is possible if leadership is provided.

I am convinced that the shift in emphasis which I have been describing can in a decade produce a dramatic revitalization of our national literary scene. I see no reason why we cannot create a literary audience which will treble the readership of existing little magazines, make it possible to publish books of poetry on a break-even basis, and provide a market for those publishers willing to present collections of short stories. To achieve these goals we have to create a national interest in contemporary literature and build from that a genuine community of readers and writers.

I envision a great range of publications, each with its own special character—not the "neutral repository for creative efforts" but publications with active, enthusiastic support. I see no reason why we cannot one day expect students entering our writing classes to have been subscribers to little magazines since their high-school years, to be aware already of what is being published and to be able to support with enthusiasm their favorite periodicals and writers. Is it so fantastic to imagine students and even a few colleagues discussing the fiction and poetry of little magazines as naturally as literate adults now talk about what has just appeared in the *New Yorker*?

I am not describing a vast cultural revolution. Such a group will always be a minority within a society which is concerned with other values; but I can visualize this minority becoming a genuine community, sharing a body of contemporary literary works and a familiarity with living authors and poets, sharing also a vocabulary and a set of values, differing sharply in their preferences, taking pleasure both in the agreements and the disagreements, and exploring avenues of growth which are essential for creative development.

We are years from this right now. What's worse, we aren't moving toward it. Like composers of non-popular music, we are in stasis. Almost no one is listening. We're crazy if we claim we don't care. And we're myopic if we can't see what direction we must take. It does no good to pay us to produce more fiction and poetry if there is no one who wants to read it.

But there *is* an audience out there. Mostly young. Help us to reach them, Mr. Randolph. Help them to find us, too. Provide the bridge and we'll give them something they will really value. □

the iowa review

Winter, 1977, No. 8/1

Fiction

A Special Feature: Eugene K. Garber
Russell Banks

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M. D. Uroff on Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry
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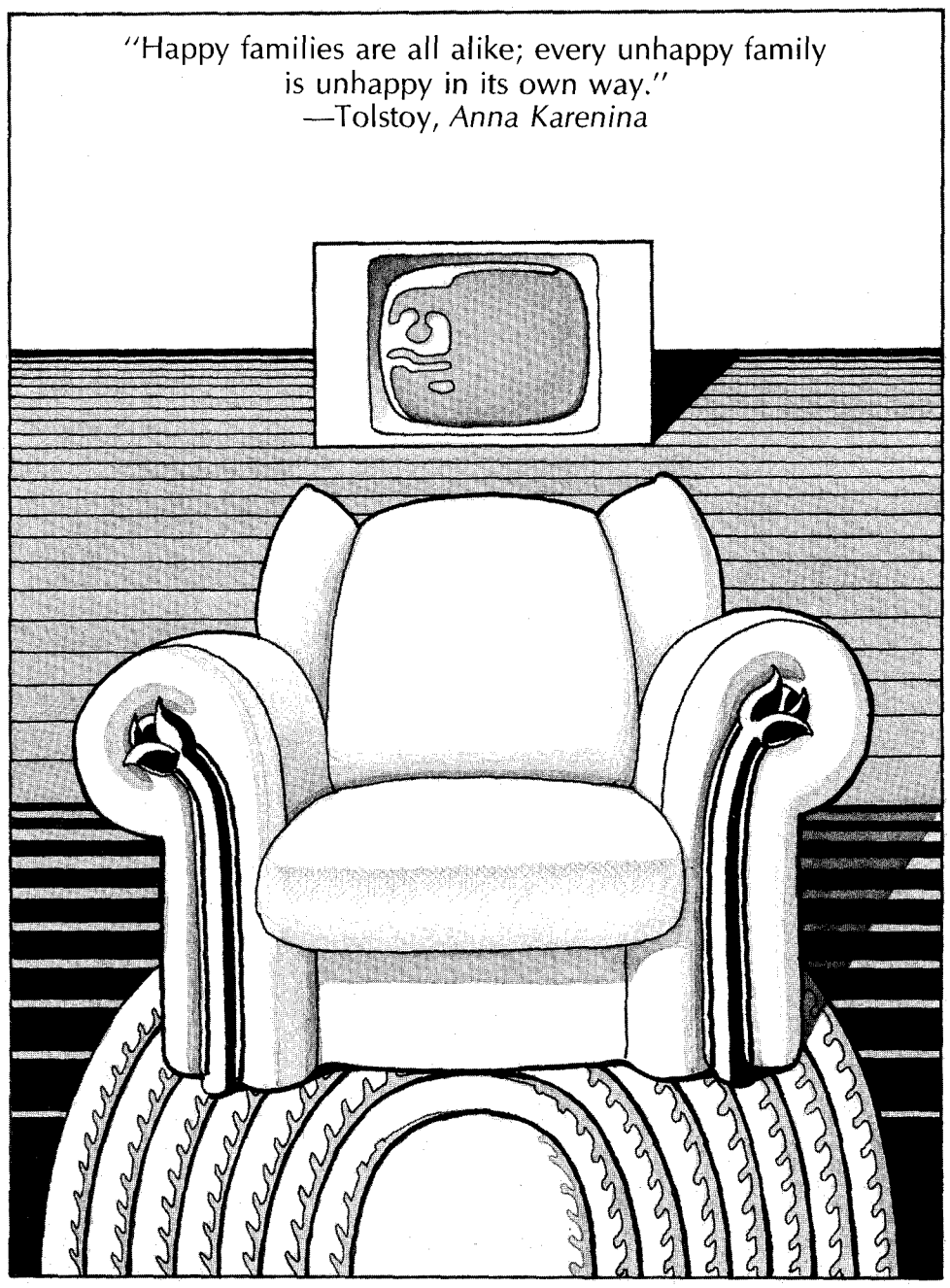
FAMILY HAPPINESS

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."
—Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*



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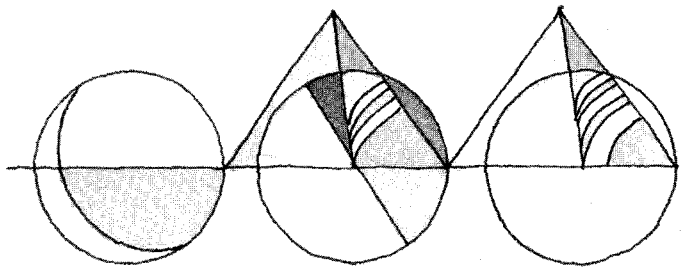

TRIANGLES

This is a story about triangles. Wherever I look they appear. Weeding the garden I pluck a thistle; a single purple tuft flanked by a leaf on either side. On walks to the brook I stumble over three cornered chunks of slate. Surrounded by mountains, I am drawn to their peaks. Angles support our edifices. I help friends shore up their barn, reenforcing beams with plywood corners. Along the road I pass a crêche; the Eternal Triangle waiting for yet another Christmas.

In the center of the first triangle is my friend, nine months pregnant. The prospective father constructs other people's houses many miles away. She is alone. Seven months ago she decided to have the baby knowing that her lover, seven years her junior and confused, did not want to be a father. At thirty, an artist, independent, she had already vacuumed out three fertilized eggs. This child, she felt, must be born. She told herself the young lover was a good choice for a sire: attractive, talented, excellent genes. Poor upbringing caused his problems. With her own child she could correct those errors. She hesitated only because she feared the child might interfere with her art, so she consulted oracles: friends, teachers, psychiatrists and astrologers. Her former therapist forecast disaster, but wished her luck. An old painting teacher, who considered her a genius, said,

"My own creativity increased after I gave birth."

The astrologer told her the child would be a Leo, a powerful fire sign. This pleased her. Her young lover followed her from apartments, to offices, through corridors, reminding her again and again, "I will not be responsible." She told him she understood, he was not to worry.

One of the advisors she consulted was an old lover, a man she lived with for two years. Because the relationship had never been electrifying, she ended it. After she left, he insisted they stay in touch. His letters followed her from small single rooms to the bedrooms of other men. The relationship had no name; no longer a love affair, but more than friendship. When he heard about the pregnancy, he gave the problem serious attention, treating it delicately, like a pot centered on his wheel. At first he was negative; he examined himself for jealousy, but he could not picture her with an infant crawling around her paint covered studio. As he thought about it longer, it began to seem possible. A baby would structure her life as nothing else had. Perhaps she would spend more time painting and less time chasing disastrous lovers. He told her this. Knowing the younger man might not be present when the time came, he volunteered to fill in, if needed. "I'll be the Godfather," he said.

She told her young lover, "I expect nothing from you. The child will have my name. I will do it alone."

JUDITH BETH COHEN is on the faculty of Goddard College and is working on a novel based on her "Vermont Diary" (American Review 22).

Her face looked fixed and hard when she spoke, like the rigid lines in her paintings. He did not argue, there was no more to be said. She assumed her decision would bring the affair to an end. Though she was prepared never to see him again, their relationship continued. Late at night he would arrive at her place and climb in bed beside her. She responded to his touch with great hunger, wanting him more now that she carried his child.

The woman and her old lover discussed the young man as they would an absent child.

"He's very moody," she explained. "He doesn't like people. I think he's still trying to get over his father's suicide."

The two men met over dinner in her apartment. Though the older one tended to be withdrawn and silent like his counterpart, he felt paternal and tried to put the young man at ease, to draw him out with questions.

"Doing any work this winter?" he asked.

The young man swallowed some Bourbon, hesitating. "I have a few carpentry jobs, but they're scarce, so I have to go wherever I can find work."

The older man poured more Bourbon to fill the silence. "Getting work is rough. My job's pretty rotten. I sort junk in a salvage lot."

"Can't you sell your pots?" the younger one asked.

"Not enough to live on."

The woman cooked, leaving them to converse alone. Having both men around her was pleasing, but awkward, though she was used to discomfort with her men. Precise and direct in her work, she painted geometric forms, stark clean lines. By contrast she sought attachments muddied by blurred communication, preferring surprise to clarity. The young man worried her. She did not want him to feel rejected. Though he might not be eager for fatherhood, she desired him; their union was electric. Still, her old lover's support was comforting. He would make a good father if not a good mate. She tried thinking of him as a brother, but she had no brother, so the analogy failed and she stopped probing for the meaning of it all.

The ménage à trois lasted only an evening. Each of them went separate ways for the winter. She travelled south alone to be Visiting Artist at a University. The old lover returned to his shack behind a house trailer where he secluded himself in cave-like darkness, wedging clay, insisting necessity rather than choice made his life like this. For the young man it was a winter of ill luck, jobs failed, lost opportunities, employers complaining. He felt more inadequate than before when he saw her again in the spring.

Expecting nothing, she was prepared to live alone until August brought the birth. Her young lover surprised her by moving in, but he stared uneasily at her transformed body with its huge belly protruding from her tiny frame like a helium balloon tied around her middle, deflatable if pricked.

They sat silently at the round oak table. She watched him

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finish his breakfast Cheerios, unable to believe he had not touched her once the previous night. He apologized, but the pregnancy repulsed him.

"It will be different after the baby is born," he promised.

Hidden in the bathroom, she cried, despising herself for showing vulnerability and need, but she still desired him, even at the end of her term. Clearing her throat, she composed herself, approached him, and formally asked, "If I must accept sexual abstinence, do you think you could bring yourself to put your arm around me?"

He strained and tried. One night he even managed, reluctantly but gently, to caress the protruding hard flesh of her belly, but his attitude was wrong. She told him he must move out. He gathered his few belongings without protest.

Alone in her apartment she prepared for the infant's arrival, preoccupied by baby furniture, baby clothing and other apparatus and equipment necessary for motherhood. Schooling herself well, she read all the books she could find on labor and delivery. She watched her body, observing its changes, noises and signals, counting the kicks and turns of the foetus, charting the frequency of her urination, examining her ankles for swelling, making herself an object of detached study. Every day she recorded her weight and swallowed vitamins, careful to take enough calcium so the child's teeth and bones would be well formed. At night she fantasized about former lovers, or new lovers who might not find a pregnant female body repulsive.

The hospital, she discovered, would not allow visitors if she wanted the infant in her room. Exceptions were made only for the father and the grandparents. Feeling she could not go through the whole experience alone, she decided to call her old lover.

"Guess what? He moved out. Is there any chance you could come?"

"Well, yes, but I'm working. I guess I'll just have to take a week off."

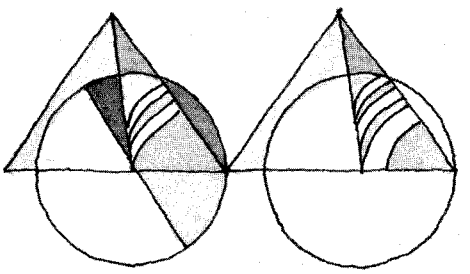
"That won't be enough," she said. "You will have to come at least two weeks early so I can teach you the breathing and you can be in labor with me. We have to practice. That means now."

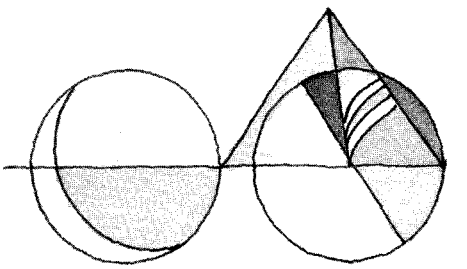
"O.K. They'll just have to let me go. That's really incredible. I'll get to see a birth."

"Last night I dreamt it had flippers instead of arms. Are you sure it's really all right? It could drag on for weeks. You shouldn't feel compelled to do this."

"Look," he said. "I said I wanted to do it. I'll be there day after tomorrow."

"Good, I'm really greatful, and I know of a pottery studio nearby you can use while you wait."





He arrived after a long bus trip and moved into her place, sleeping beside a body very different from the one he made love to in the past, but sex was not an issue. They no longer desired each other in that way. Living together brought back an arrangement that never fit. He appeared remote and silent as she remembered him; she seemed demanding and persistent, as he remembered her. The baby was late. He felt useless wondering what he was doing here. His money ran out so she supported him, doling out dollars and change like a child's allowance. The summer days pulsated as they waited. Children and hot rodders grew louder on the street below. Her phone rang steadily with friends and relatives asking why she was still at home. The young lover called from his job in another state. The older man answered the phone.

"Do you despise me?" the prospective father asked. He was sure all her friends must hold him in contempt since he had acted just as he warned he would. "At least he's concerned," she said.

The old lover and the pregnant woman sat opposite each other at the round table. Geranium plants bloomed around them, withered, sent out new buds. The changing table waited with cans of baby talcum, soap, and cotton tipped swabs, arranged like a still life. She tried to work, but her size made it difficult for her to reach the edges of her large canvases. Her painted forms lost their angles; circles and eggs floated across a pink background. Amoebas with tails and tiny fingers swam around the center of the canvas, but her concentration failed.

He went for walks, escaping from the confined, womblike heat of her second floor studio. In his borrowed workshop, he threw pots, but each time he left he worried that she might be going into labor, so he hurried back to wait again. She resented his presence, but fidgeted while he was gone. I will be glad he is here for the birth, she told herself, if I can just get through this time of waiting without sending him away. "All women get like this toward the end," she assured him apologetically.

A new triangle has been forming. Remove the young lover and replace him with another woman, the same age as the expectant mother, also an artist, similar in appearance, both small, strong, auburn haired. They could be sisters but each one has a real sister someplace. I am the second woman.

I am alone in the house I have shared with my husband for seven years. He has gone west for the summer to study the crafts of the Indians and we are separated for the first time. What this disjunction means is still unclear. I spend my summer days reflecting; sorting through the hurt, resentment,

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anger, the jealousy and the nostalgic longing. They each come and go, different moods for different times of day; anxiety in the morning, romantic fantasies by night. My echoes in our empty house bounce off the void left by his absence. I try not to feel abandoned. This separation was in part my idea. I wish I could shed the heaviness I feel and emerge from my house, be with friends and come alive as a separate person, but I am having great difficulty.

Since the other woman is my friend and I have no child that needs me, I spent much time with her before her old lover arrived. For hours I listened, while she talked about her young lover. After he left, I drove her to the doctor and waited in the reception room while the Obstetrician examined her, leafing through magazines that warned of the danger of having babies when the mother is past thirty, an elderly primapara, or the higher rate of breast cancer in childless women; designs nature has concocted to punish those like me who do not procreate. Together we shopped for baby things. I carried the white straw changing table we found at a rummage sale up the stairs while she walked behind me. When she thought she might be going into labor prematurely, I took her to spend the night at my house and gave her a novel about sisters to read in the hospital. I hoped the baby would come early, before her old lover arrived, so I could make the long drive with her in the night. Having such a mission distracts me from myself. For me it is a vicarious pregnancy, though I have chosen to avoid conceiving. It is easy for me to slide into another life through identification. With other people I care for deeply, I seem to have this problem of forgetting where they end and I begin. That is what happened with my husband, I could not accept his separateness, his work. I wanted him to be more like me, because I failed when I tried following his ways. So we reached this impasse, this separation.

When the subject of my husband's pottery studio came up, I told my friend it would be all right if her guest used it. Empty, the wheel sat dormant, unopened bags of clay stacked against it. I made the decision thinking it was what my husband would have done.

Things change between my friend and me after her old lover arrives. She says she wants us to know each other, she thinks I will like him. Though I sense the impending triangle, I take refuge in innocence, telling myself I see less of her now because she has a companion and no longer needs me. Her rejection hurts, but I put it away, storing it with other slights I am trying to forget. When I do see her, we are a threesome. They come for dinner. I take them for rides to lovely places I admire; up a mountain on a bright Sunday afternoon to watch Morgan mares and their foals. We sit together in a restaurant I select. The man and I sip drinks my friend refuses because of the baby. He and I exchange few words. I speak past him, addressing her, gossiping about people he does not know, but I am aware of his quiet presence, his pale, clear blue eyes, the half smile on his lips after he swallows some Bourbon. What connection can be made between us, caught together waiting for this child whose life we had nothing to do with creating?

Though I see less of my friend now, I see more of her old lover. He comes to my house nearly every day, but we talk little. I proceed with my life as if he was not there, making sketches I crumple and discard. Occasionally, we share a cup of tea or an English muffin as he passes my table on his way to the shop.

"I wish it would happen. I am beginning to wonder why I came, there's too much time to think about why I'm doing this," he says as he drinks the tea.

"I could travel, visit friends at the ocean. There is no reason for me to stay here, but I'm waiting, too, for her baby to come."

I know he senses my need. I wonder if he sees me as desperate. He remains distant. I do not move toward him, preferring not to increase his burden of service by inflicting myself upon him. Perhaps he knows he performs a wordless service by filling this empty house. His presence makes me care for him. My friend and I do not chat about him easily the way we did about my husband or her young lover. All that remains unspoken between the three of us expands as the foetus gets overripe.

One night she chooses not to join us for dinner, saying she is tired. He and I talk for the first time, he about his romantic disasters, me about my troublesome marriage. He asks what happened. I try explaining, though I don't understand myself. I became involved with another man, but it turned out to be nothing. My husband met someone else and his romance became a compelling love affair. I regretted my infidelity, but it was too late. She may be with him now, carrying his notebooks while he roams the desert chasing Indians, I don't even know. We agreed we needed time apart. When he returns, we'll reconsider.

"I feel ridiculous every time I begin a new relationship," he tells me. "They all seem doomed from the start."

I ask why. He cannot explain.

"I live with a woman for a month and it's fine. For some reason things turn. We no longer have anything to say to each other."

Lovers cannot remain friends, he believes. All his former women are now his enemies. My friend is the only exception, and he has put forth great effort to preserve that relationship, he assures me.

We sit in a local bar drinking beer from bottles. At the next booth a man in a cowboy hat sips whiskey through a straw, and mumbles something incoherent to us. The juke box plays, "I'm proud to be an Okie from Muscogee," though we are in New England.

He advises me. "I think it's a mistake to become involved in a new relationship when the old one is unfinished." I hear this as a warning; he will accept my husband's workshop, not his wife.

As the end approaches I search for a word or gesture to let him know how much I have appreciated his presence. He begins talking about what he will do after the birth.

"Do you feel like hiking?" he asks. "I need some physical exertion."

Together we examine a trail book describing the path up Camel's Hump. He hesitates, "I can go only if the baby is not much later, I must go back to work sometime."

We work out the details of the climb during the following days, trying to coax the reluctant infant with our planning. Three nights later a storm begins as the three of us dine at my house. Lightning bolts dance across the pond, the rain intensifies. My friend is afraid to go out, so I invite them both to spend the night. Deciding who will sleep where is complicated. She and I could share my double bed, or perhaps she would prefer to sleep alone in my study? Just before I offer my bed to the two

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of them, her labor begins. After an hour the storm weakens, her contractions grow stronger. They prepare for the drive to the hospital leaving me with a list of people to call.

"There is no point in you going along," she says. "They will not let you up."

The phone call I wait for does not come until morning.

"It's a boy." He sounds jubilant, as if the child was his own.

"How much did he weigh? How is she?" His ecstasy is catching.

"Almost ten pounds, they had to use forceps. It was a difficult delivery. She's all right, but very tired. They think I'm her husband."

"Come for dinner when you get back."

We feel giddy and liberated, toasting the baby's health.

"I held him," he tells me.

"Does he look like her?" I wonder. We stare at each other across the dinner plates, neither of us sorry she cannot share this meal. As she lies in the hospital nursing her infant, her old lover and I touch for the first time. He spends the night. The day after the birth we climb Camel's Hump together. For a short time only, we are two instead of three. □

THOMAS McAFEE

UNCLE EZRA ON RAINY DAYS

Uncle Ezra has skipped again:
The bedspread is gone, all
The windows in his room are open,
And, most important, the goldfish
In the pond are missing. He has
Gone somewhere to free them.

He always leaves on rainy days,
I think to let the rain come in.

He should be in New York
By now, checking in at the
Chelsea. A bedspread, a bucket
Of goldfish, and a small valise
With his diary and some clothes.

"A week, at the most," he tells
The desk clerk. "Yes, Uncle Ezra,
And about the goldfish?" "I'll
Find a big aquarium. That's not
Freedom—but suggest something else."

He never stays much longer
Than a day and night. The bedspread
Over the Chelsea bed, the windows
Open, DO NOT DISTURB on the door,
The goldfish free, the diary blank—
And Uncle Ezra takes a jet back here.
We welcome him back in the sunshine.

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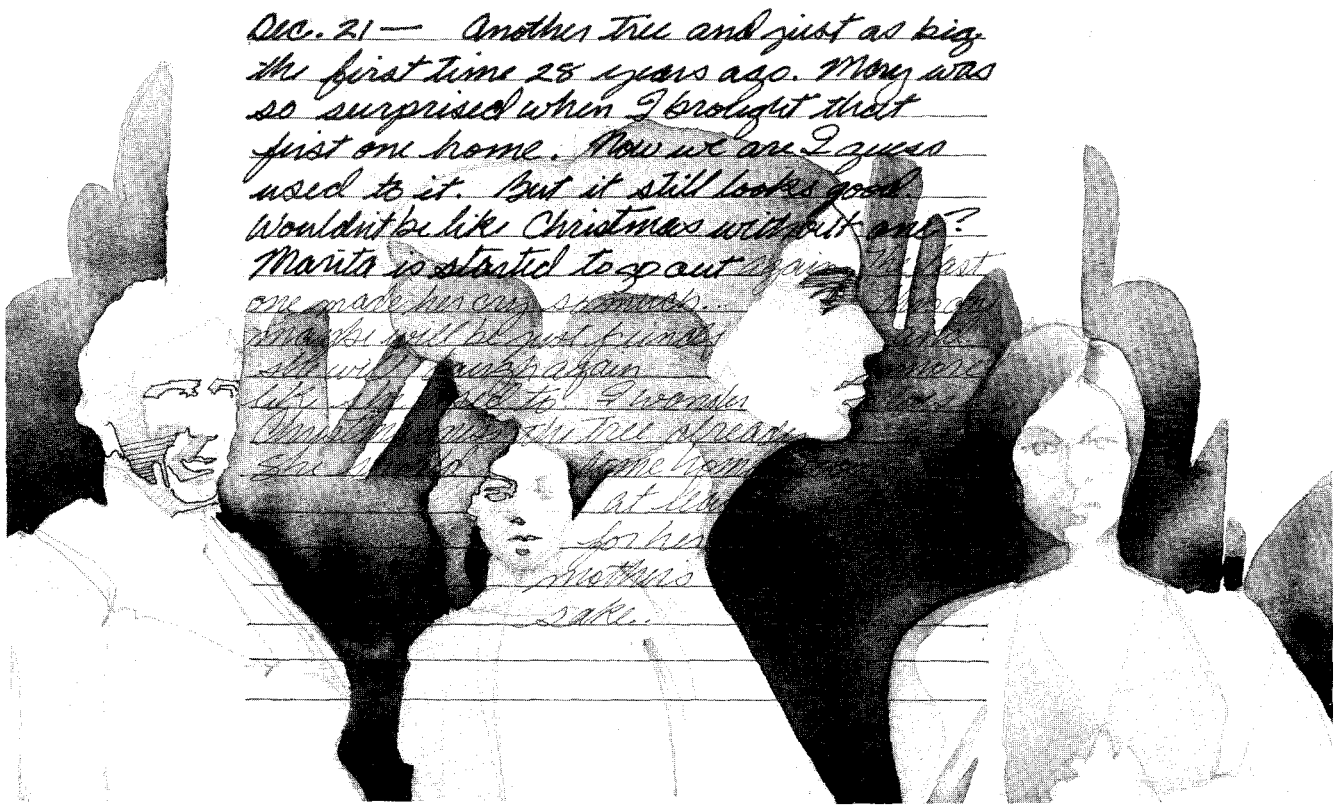
John Druska


Dec. 21 — Another tree and just as big
the first time 28 years ago. Mary was
so surprised when I brought that
first one home. Now we are I guess
used to it. But it still looks good
wouldn't be like Christmas without one?
Marita is started to

THE MEATCUTTER'S FAMILY

She waits at a second-storey window, one of three set in the corner bay of the long building, over the porch of the store downstairs. Her husband is approaching the street to the east of the house, walking toward her. He is carrying a tremendous Christmas tree, untied and tip-forward, lugging it with his arms held to one side as if it were a battering ram. Whenever his arms droop with its weight, branches catch along the caked snow that shines where skirts of streetlight fall. The branches bend back, but are resilient enough never to break. Each time he feels them trailing, he tugs the tree up and closer to himself. The middle branches screen his torso and face; seen from the upstairs window he might resemble, squat as he is, some weird tree-creature—green and bobbing snout aimed ahead, short legs waddling beneath. Her face does not register his coming. She looks as impassive as a spinster-princess watching, from her castle turret, the deserted road her suitors used to ride.

Almost across the street, he feels his nose start to drip and he sniffs. He rubs his moustache against a branch. He feels the sap from the trunk stick to his hands. He is so involved in the tree he hasn't time to notice whether she has seen him.

She is thinking instead of a man scrubbing his hands. She lies in bed, under covers, and listens to him washing in the next room. She imagines the water sluicing through his fingers; she hears him lift a small metallic tool and hold it under the faucet's stream. A scalpel that glistens in the overhead light. When it turns quiet, he is wiping his hands and the instrument dry. Then he is coming toward her, opening the door to their room. A wedge of light cuts across his desk and the black bag upon it. He walks to it and replaces his scalpel. He dresses down to his underwear and crosses to the bed. She feigns sleep. He walks back out of the room and clicks off the hall light. He reenters, stops near the bed as if he has forgotten something and returns to the black bag. He squeezes it shut and she hears the lock catch. He walks to his side of the bed and slides in under the quilt. He turns on one hip and soon falls asleep. Thrills like the blood rising from narrow cuts quicken her lapse toward relaxation and sleep.

Downstairs her husband is entering by the back door. He has turned the tree over on its side and opened the door, and he is trying to shove the tree, butt-forward, all the way in. But in the tight space of the back porch he has to grip the tree near its top and he cannot get enough leverage to force the thick end through. He sets the tree down again and walks out of and around the building to the side door. He enters the hallways that give off to the kitchen of the downstairs flat on one side and to the back of his store on the other. He stamps the snow off his rubbers and goes into the store.

A strange quiet breathes there; boxes and cans on the shelves seem animated even as they are still, as if they shift minutely in their places or as if their molecules have started to refigure themselves. Maybe the blue-white streetlight that comes through the large front windows like a fluorescent beach causes the feeling. Or the sawdust scattered down the aisles that makes you think of an arena, of rows of witnesses.

JOHN DRUSKA grew up in Chicago, graduated from Cincinnati, where he held the Elliston poetry fellowship.

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Occasionally along the sawdust, mostly near the chopping block behind the counter, wisps of juices and blood gleam where the light discovers them. Just next to the cash register, alongside the block, he finds the broom he is looking for, steps up on a crate, and bangs the tin ceiling a couple of times.

He knows his wife is in the upstairs flat. She has been going up there for hours every evening, after the store closes and they eat supper, so that he has come to think of her as a sentinel posted to watch for their lost daughter's return. They know of course where the daughter is, sharing an apartment with two other girls near Lincoln Park Zoo, not far from the school she attends. But his wife has reminded him again and again how silly they think her insistence on living apart from the family, how strongly they feel she ought to, and will, return. She has, after all, the upstairs flat to live in, meals each day as often as she wishes, the el to school and downtown just a few blocks away . . .

When his wife makes it downstairs she helps him get the tree indoors. She pulls from inside while he pushes from out. They start laughing when it finally slips through and she stumbles backward a little. The tree is too fresh to have lost many needles. And it grows huge when he stands it upright; it takes both of them to insert and balance the tree in the stand he has readied. After he screws the trunk tightly in place, he walks back out of the living room to remove his rubbers at the door. His wife has already laid down a few towels to soak up the moisture he had brought in with him, and she is pulling out the vacuum cleaner to pick up stray needles.

He is exhausted, and sits down to rest. She is sweating from helping him and from vacuuming. Small blotches appear on her dress where it tightens to contain her belly. There are two changes in her since their marriage that her husband has noticed most. One is the way her voice has turned shrill. Another is the loaf of fat she has carried since bearing her children. In him she has noticed how his legs have thinned out and grown whiter than ever. And how his voice has been vanishing. He seldom talks. Even less since Christina's leaving.

"Where is Marita tonight?" he says.

"A date. Someone new. I think he's taking her to a show."

"She'll be back early?"

"I told her. But you know she hasn't been out in so long. Since that Michael."

"When will she help you do the tree?"

"Ach, I can do it myself. If there's anything left later, she'll be back. You're cold, no? You want some soup? It's heated on the stove."

With the pelican chin of his spoon he taps the bone that floats in his soup. He thinks of his daughters. When Christina had gone with the Mexican one, he recalls, the one no one liked, she would sneak out of and into the upstairs flat so often that he had taken to keeping watch in the store. In the shadows of that sentient place he would wait, sometimes most of the night, merely to see, to be sure she had come back. Until a customer told him one day over the meat counter of the Mexican's wife and kids holed up in a shanty a few blocks south. One night soon afterward he had pulled out the gun he has always hidden in a drawer under the register, run outside when a car stopped a few houses down to let Christina out, and threatened to kill the Mexican if he ever returned. The man swore at him strangely and drove off. Christina ran upstairs whimpering. He went back inside the store and sat down on a crate against the freezer, where Marita found him crying early that morning.

He hears his wife rummaging through the small bedroom adjacent to the parlor. No one has ever slept in the room. It has no windows and is just inside the back door. Either girl might have been victimized there by nightmare visits or periodic frights. They are superstitious anyway. So the two daughters had slept in the same bed, in the larger room next to the kitchen, until Christina moved up to the empty flat not much over a year ago. At least it was airy up there, and bright. They checked on her often anyway. She came down for all her meals, and usually sat with them the entire evening, around the kitchen table or on the side steps when it became warmer. Except for her time with the Mexican. Some months after that, suddenly, she left them. Now he thinks he would have preferred that she go on sleeping just on the other side of the wall from the room he shares with his wife. Against that wall, next to their dresser, his wife keeps a little statue of the Christ child on a pedestal, and before the statue a votive candle. She lights the candle on any occasion a member of the family might be in danger. If one of the girls is out and it begins to storm. If one of them has to go anywhere in an airplane. If her own mother, who lives with two married daughters a few blocks west of them, comes down with a sore throat or a fever or suffers a fall, as she has the last several years, in this slippery weather. He lifts the bowl to his mouth to drink down the rest of the soup.

His wife has pulled out the strings of colored lights and cartons of ornaments, and has started to dress the tree. He gets up to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. The water makes him want to urinate. He stops off in the bathroom before he walks out of the flat and reenters his store. He turns on a small lamp attached to the wall, opens a drawer under his counter and pulls out a ledger in which he checks figures for the day's sales. He is sitting on a stool, writing with the stub of a soft pencil. Oblique columns of thick dark numerals cross the paper bags he uses to doublecheck his totals. He makes a few last entries in the ledger and replaces it. He walks over to the register. From under it, out of the cavity where he hides his gun, he lifts a bigger ledger and carries this back to the counter. He pages through the book, filled with dated paragraphs in his handwriting. Every once in a while he hesitates and laughs at one: "Mary was mad today and threw a carton of milk at me." He reaches a page three-quarters full, and writes in:

Dec. 21—Another tree and just as big the first time 28 years ago. Mary was so surprised when I brought that first one home. Now we are I guess used to it. But it still looks good. Wouldn't be like Christmas without one? Marita is started to go out again. The last one made her cry so much. This one maybe will just be friends and she will laugh again more like she used to. I wonder does Christina miss the tree already. She should come home soon, at least for her mother's sake.

He replaces the second ledger and shuts off the light. For a few moments he sits on the stool listening for the infinitesmal creaking that punctuates the silence in his store. The shelves seem to keep resettling themselves. He wonders if the quiet motions of the groceries make that happen. He wonders what insects or mice inhabit the crevices under his wooden floor, the

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spaces inside his walls. Or are the carcasses that hang in his freezer fitting themselves with ice armature, creaking at their joints.

He walks over and pulls up the latch on the freezer door. It swings open. There are quartered cattle hanging from the great hooks, and plucked birds that look pimply and embarrassed. Rows of meats suspended like unwilling rush-hour riders on some arctic subway. He enters a tunnel of frigid air. His breath grows out of him and vanishes like language spoken to the dead. He cannot figure why he is here, so he totes up in his mind the meat he has on hand and leaves the freezer.

He finds his wife atop a small step-ladder that she has pushed in against one side of the tree. She has attached the lights already, from top to bottom, and turned them on. Only a few aren't working this year. He screws one of them tighter and taps a couple with a thumbnail. They all come on. His wife is touching up the top part of the tree with tinsel and a few more ornaments.

"Look, I'm ready to put the angel on," she says.

"Maybe we should wait for Marita." He is walking slowly around the front of the tree, noticing the fullness of it, how the ornaments and lights never weigh down a tree of his. He used to have to travel a mile to Crawford Avenue for one this size. Now Wally, who runs a tree lot two blocks away, orders one especially for him each year.

"That's okay. I saved some ornaments for her. And she can put on a little more tinsel tomorrow."

"I wish Christina would call, so we know if she's staying a couple of days with us."

She does not mention to him that Christina called earlier, while he was out for the tree. Washing dishes in her flat, she could hear the phone ringing upstairs. Perhaps her daughter assumed that she was keeping her vigil. When the phone first started to ring she thought it was Christina, and after six or seven rings she was certain. Once they had figured out how long it would take to answer each other's phone—the trip through the store, passage through a secret half-door at one of its corners, the steep stairway up in the front hall—and decided that a dozen to eighteen rings would normally do. She hadn't wanted to answer the phone tonight. Why should she jump for her daughter now, she thought, after all these years and what she's done to us? She counted to eighteen by the time she had climbed upstairs, let herself in and answered.

"She'll call the last minute again," she says, "and want us to jump for her."

"I'm tired," her husband says. He sighs a little when he sits down, in the middle of the sofa across from his tree, and lets his vision of it envelop him.

"You go to bed, then. It's getting late. I'll wait for Marita. She'll be home soon."

He rests, watching the tree until he begins to doze. She kneels in front of the tree, picking up the loose tissue papers that had been wrapped around the ornaments. She gets up and goes to the windows to open the blinds. Now that the tree is up she will leave the blinds open each night until she turns out the lights. She puts two fingers on her husband's shoulder and pushes on it until he awakens. He yawns and stretches his arms.

"I'm going to bed," he says. He lifts himself off the sofa and walks out of the room.

"I'll be there in a little while."

The water runs briefly. She hears it splashing about the sink while she puts lids back on the storage cartons and stacks them up. She carries them into the spare bedroom. When she returns to the parlor she hears the toilet flushing. She straightens a few crooked ornaments. A door closes. She goes into the kitchen, turns on the radio softly and sits down at the table, next to where some newspapers are lying.

She pages through the *Chicagoski*, skimming most of it, the Polish sections she used to read to her father when she was much younger, spending more time on the articles in English. She picks up the *Sun-Times* and starts looking through it for Ann Landers. Someone is reading verse over the radio in a honeyed voice, and this leads into some lilting music. She gets up to heat the coffee. By the clock on her stove it is ten minutes to eleven. She returns to Ann Landers. Every so often she lets out a couple of syllables of small, high-pitched laughter.

An hour later she hears an engine idling outside. She has been scanning Kup's Column, trying to find a word or two of gossip about a radio announcer who happens to be a distant relative. She walks over to the window and peeks through the blinds. Marita is sitting up against the door, her head turned toward the driver. They appear to be talking. The taillights of the car stop glowing through the exhaust breath. The engine shuts off, chattering as it does, and its last vapors disperse in the chilled air. For a few seconds the curious noise of light falling from the streetlamps is the only sound outside. Then the door opens on the driver's side and someone gets out, as if lifted by his visible breath. He walks around the front of the car to the other side and helps Marita from her seat. The frozen snow cover squeaks underfoot while they walk toward the back porch.

She hurries from the window, across the kitchen, into the parlor. They are entering the porch, kicking against its doorsill to loosen the snow on their shoes. Behind them is one of Marita's favorite places, the old smokehouse where her father used to cure meat and make sausage for the holiday feasts. Marita's mother turns the key of the back door. It is always kept in the open hole, on the inside, after she and her husband are home for the night. She quicksteps back to the kitchen.

Marita knocks twice to signal, tries the door and opens it. She hears her mother's last few steps—the loose houseshoes slapping against her heels—and knows her mother will wait up for her in the kitchen, as she usually does. Marita's date follows her in. They skirt the incredibly full, illumined tree and it's the first thing he remarks upon, astonished at its size.

Marita's mother overhears his louder comments and her daughter's light, comfortable laughter. They become quiet for a while. Something is whispered perhaps. In a few minutes Marita appears in her stockinged feet.

"Hi, Ma," she says softly. She knows her father is asleep.

"Who's the boy?"

"Oh, Gene. He's from the south side. His grandparents used to live in the neighborhood here. You want to meet him?"

"No, not yet. Isn't it late?"

"He was just going to drop me off," Marita explains, "but it's so cold out I thought I'd make some hot chocolate for us. It'll just take a few minutes."

Her mother stands up and Marita passes by her on the way to the stove.

"You've got liquor on your breath," her mother whispers.

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"What've you been drinking?"

"Just some wine, Ma, that's all."

"Ach, wine. It's whiskey on your breath is what it is. You stink from it." She is still whispering, in a hissing way.

"Ma, *please* . . . " Marita turns toward her mother and looks as if she is going to cry.

"Look," her mother says, a little louder, "you give him some coffee right now and leave him go."

Marita pours a single cup of the warmed coffee left on the stove. Her mother keeps talking. "You need your sleep. It's almost Christmas. We got a lot of work to get done around here."

Marita walks out of the room. She speaks from the parlor loud enough for her mother to hear. "I'm sorry, Gene. My mother's not feeling well and I'll have to help her with a few things . . . "

"Well, is something wrong?" he asks, much more quietly. "Is it something I did?"

"No, no. Don't worry about it. Everything'll be all right."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"No, don't worry. Just drink the coffee and let me take care of it after you leave."

The coffee is lukewarm by now and he drinks it straight down.

"Gene, thanks," Marita says. "I had a nice time tonight." They have stood up and she is guiding him toward the door. Christmas lights mottle their faces.

"Hey, well listen," Gene says, "you want me to give you a call tomorrow maybe?" He is rushing his words.

Marita stands in the open door in front of the tree. It seems to be opening its arms to her. "Well, it's going to be busy around here. Why don't you wait till after Christmas Day." Her dark long hair droops over her shoulders, which bend in a little, over her small breasts. The eye sockets of her narrow, catchy face appear to deepen.

"How about New Year's Eve? You doing anything New Year's Eve? There's a party . . . " It's coming faster than he planned.

"Gene, I don't know. I promised someone I used to go out with that he could see me New Year's Eve."

"So you got a date, then."

"No, not a date. Just a meeting." Marita hears the slippers again, flopping up against her mother's feet. "I have to go, Gene, and help my mother."

"Yeah, okay."

"I had a nice time. Thanks." She lifts up on her tiptoes and kisses him quickly. She squeezes his arm a few seconds longer. He's not sure whether to hug her. She listens to her mother moving around the kitchen and begins to close the door.

"Well, I guess I'll call you in a couple of days then."

"Be careful on the way home, Gene."

When he is starting the car he looks over through the open blinds and is astonished again at the size of the tree.

Marita walks straight through the kitchen and into her room. Her mother follows her. "I don't like that liquor on your breath," her mother says. "And I don't want it to happen again."

"Ma, I'm a *junior* in college. I think I can decide for myself."

"As long as you live in the same house with us . . . "

"It's nothing, Ma. What if I started to stay out overnight. Or if I went on weekend trips with guys from school. What then?"

"Your father would die." Marita can't help noticing how her mother squeals when she talks.

"Well, this is nothing," Marita says, "and Daddy's asleep anyway."

"But I'm awake and I sit up worrying about you. We don't even know this Gene you're with."

For several minutes Marita has been drawing the fingernails of her left hand across her cheek, pressing a little harder each time. "Ma, please. You're gonna drive me nuts with your worry."

"You think all your running around doesn't drive *me* nuts?"

Marita starts crying.

"So you cry. Does that help now?"

"Shut up, Ma, shut up!" Marita hits the bed she has been sitting on. Her mother takes a few steps toward her and grabs her left hand at the wrist.

"Don't talk to *me* like that," her mother says.

"You, you, you. Who are you anyway?" Marita rubs her eyes with her free hand. Eye shadow smudges her face. "You always take it out on me. Just because you're stuck with the store, Christina's gone, Grandma's sick . . . "

"Don't talk like that."

"I wish I were never born. You should've married that doctor you always brag about . . . " Large sobs interrupt her words. " 'Oh, how he chased me,' " Marita's voice rises and squeaks. It becomes her mother's. " 'I could've married him anytime I wanted.' "

"You just keep quiet now," her mother shouts. "Don't wake your father."

"You could have had a family you like, then." Marita is almost screaming. Her mother raises her right hand and slaps Marita across the face.

"You don't say things about our family like that."

The sound of Marita's sobs has stopped. Her body continues to heave in quick spasms. All of a sudden her mother's hands drop to her side. Her mother slowly shakes her head from side to side. "*Matka Boże*," she says over and over, very quietly, to herself. Marita does not look at her.

Marita's mother shuffles out of the room. She stops in the kitchen for a moment and listens for any sounds from the other bedroom. There is a light drumroll of snoring. Marita hears her mother pour the leftover coffee down the sink and snap off the kitchen lights. She hears her mother's house slippers slapping their way toward the parlor. The sofa creaks when her mother sits down. The last tingle of the slap leaves Marita's face.

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Marita rises and walks through the dark part of the flat. Very carefully, secretly, she opens and closes the door that lets out into the side hall and the one across from it that leads to the store. Night has always been the one time she has liked staying in the store. Her father has never let her work in the place. But she remembers when she used to visit it very late and convert the store's animation to her will, playing out whatever tale or game she imagined at the time. Tonight the store's microscopic sounds strike her as tiny seismic changes in her mind. She walks up and down the aisles, touching objects that had once performed for her. Cardboard and tin. The light coming in looks ghostly. She tries to avoid walking through it. It seems to pare the skin. Near the counter it falls across a potato bin. She notices eerie little prongs growing from the eyes of several potatoes. She walks back to where her father stores empty orange crates, across from the freezer, and sits down upon one. She is crying again. She reaches down and picks up a burlap sack from the floor. She begins to pull at it and rub it with her hands.

Already she can see Gene falling in love. What they call love. It will turn out the same as Michael. She infatuates the boy. He tries to draw closer and closer. There are many dates. She lets him touch her breast, run his hand up her thighs. He asks her to touch him. They kiss more often and longer. Something comes between them. She has never been able to name it. It enervates whatever passion she felt. She lets him do what he wants.

"Why don't you *do* anything? he says.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not responding. I kiss you and you're limp."

"Maybe I can't," she says.

They grow edgy on dates. The least impasse causes tumult. Their phone conversations increase. They accuse each other. Of what doesn't matter. She starts smoking heavily; scratches her face more. On one date with Michael she batters her own head against his dashboard. She cries. He cries. He slaps her. She runs from him. He comes after her. They get together again. Her parents are worried.

In one scene her mother grabs the phone from her while she is talking to Michael and slams it down. Her boyfriend drives madly to her house at midnight and begins pounding at the side door. She comes outside in her nightgown. Her family follows after. Her boyfriend is yelling and she cannot look at him. She cries. Her mother leads her toward the door. Her father puts up his fists.

"Come on, you. You wanna fight," he shouts.

Michael dances back and breaks out laughing. "Cut it out, old man. You're crazy," he says.

Her boyfriend surprises her at bus stops, at school, in stores. All this time she tells him it won't help. She thinks there is something wrong with her anyway. She grows more desperate. Terrific knots tighten in her body.

"Leave me alone, " she says. "I think there's something wrong with you."

He is amazed at the turnabout. "But I love you."

"I told you from the start," she says, "that I couldn't love you. I can't love." She is convinced of his aberration. She threatens to swear out a peace bond against him, to stop him from coming near. She has friends in the police department. Her parents call her boyfriend's parents to warn them of their son's madness.

It has happened and will happen again. She cannot help herself. If it *were* different, she dreams . . . For she did enjoy lying in Michael's arms, at least at first. Perhaps it will be different. In Gene's apartment after a long date, after several drinks, they will lie down together and begin to open each other's clothes. It may happen so fast she will not remember what led to her crescendo of ecstasy. She will simply indulge in the cries breaking out of her skin, and ride on maniacally into another kind of world. It didn't work that way with Michael.

They lay in bed together with their clothes on. "Do you want to make love," she said.

"I don't know. If you do."

"Maybe we shouldn't. We might like it too much . . . "

If somehow she could enter that world of ecstatic cries, yelps of animal pleasure, that she dreams. In her reverie she imagines the store filled with these sounds, the shelves abundant with pink fleshy shapes growing toward an immense orgasm. She becomes expectant, ready to embrace whatever happens, to be a living part of it.

But the sounds distort. She hears grotesque lowing and cackling that gets louder and louder. Macabre grunts of panic and fear. The latch handle of the freezer door snaps up and the door falls open. A chill catches her. She stares in horror. Inside the freezer, rows of animals dangling from large silver hooks. They are not fastened at the ankles. Instead each one is tethered in a way that twists its limbs out of socket and each has had the hook inserted at the base of its skull. Erratic breaths steam from their nostrils and mouths. Several of the animals resemble human beings. All of them are still alive. There is someone coming from the back of the freezer, dragging along one of the bound animals. It writhes and groans. All of the animals answer with tremendous heaving sounds. The person drags the animal out of the freezer, up to the chopping block. He places the creature's head on the block and lifts a large cleaver. The other animals cry out louder, a bedlam of angry and terror-stricken guttural noises. The blade whips air. Flesh rips. Some bones crackle and a gurgling sound bubbles out of the animal's throat. Marita cannot watch any longer. Not because of the blood; but because she thinks she may recognize who the meatcutter is.

In the parlor Marita's mother gets up to turn off the Christmas tree lights. One of her knees starts to collapse when she bends over the toggle switch. She straightens up, releases a little whimper of pain, and rubs the knee. She walks deliberately toward the windows, stopping a moment before the phonograph console to turn slightly the poinsettia atop it. She lifts the foil-covered pot to do this, and with her free hand flattens the ridges that have come up in the doilie under the flower. Her eyes are adjusting to the dark. She can see the oil her younger sister painted, hanging to one side of the arm chair. A still life in thick, tactile brush strokes.

"But, Ma," she recalls her sister pleading. "I might never get a chance like this again."

And: "But, Ma, I *like* to paint. It's what I want to do."

Her sister had been persuaded, nonetheless, to skip traveling to France on an art scholarship. There were things to do at home; her sister hadn't really minded all that much. After moping through the first months of summer, she and her sister began going to the beach several times a week. They would take the Blue Island streetcar downtown and walk the mile or so from there to 12th Street. They would lie on the sand and

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discuss jobs or boys, figure ways of marrying doctors or lawyers. Or talk about dating the sailors who came down to the city from the nearby base and patrolled the lakefront, eyeing the girls who made a habit of coming there to wait for them. Some of their highschool friends used to do this often. They liked to imagine what it might be like. They could almost smell popcorn and the fresh wax on the floor of the theatre, where they would neck with sailors in the darkest seats along the side aisle. The most they could bring themselves to do, though, was to giggle and avert their glances when the sailors passed.

"But, Ma," Marita's mother recalls herself pleading. "He's going to be a doctor, and he's a nice boy. You know him."

"You shouldn't think to marry someone like that."

"Ma, that's old fashioned. Just because he's Jewish."

" 'Just because, just because . . . ' You let them live in Douglas Park and you stay here."

She had pined at first, and then started going to the weekly dance at Pilsen Park. It was within walking distance, although she found it easy to attract rides home every time. At one of the affairs she was drawn to Joe because he wasn't dancing, did not like to, and admitted he had walked to the park as well. After she had met him, she stopped going to the dances. Years later, soon after they had married, he told her that the night they had met had been the only time he had ever gone to Pilsen Park.

The place itself had been torn down. Someone had built a shopping center on the site, next to the old brewery a few blocks down. The supermarket there had taken few customers from her husband's ingrained business.

She has closed the blinds, and she sits down on the sofa again. The tree appears as mammoth as ever. She laughs to remember her husband struggling home with the first one. He had held it upright in a coaster wagon, while trying to pull the wagon at the same time. The tree had fallen over just once.

She hardly knew what to make of it when she first looked out the kitchen window and saw him pulling and shoving the tree along, and she worried for him when it fell over. But once they had gotten it inside and set it up in the stand she had readied—after he had broken off the few bent twigs and explained, "I wanted to get the biggest tree there is for you"—she felt happier than she had been in a long time, and she hugged him. She had wanted to cry. Each year since, one way or another, he has brought home for Christmas what she could almost swear is the same immense tree. Now, again, it fills half the room and offers her a hundred arms, dressed like a wizard's in great green sleeves.

Her head is shaking from side to side as if she has resigned herself to something. She sits forward on the sofa, ready perhaps to rise. She is staring into the shadows of the tree, letting herself enter them, letting the tree's arms encircle her mind. She sits back, relaxing against a cushion. Pine scent covers her like excelsior. A few images, the closing frames of a film, flicker across her eyes: She wakes in bed to discover her husband's hand lying next to her face on the pillow. It twitches a little while he snores. She smells the odors of animal flesh and organs. They inhabit his hands in spite of his scrubbing.

She is finished watching the scene. She is looking at nothing but the darkness at the heart of the tree. She has moved herself into it; the tree holds her there. Together at last, they close upon each other to conceive the shape of a different life. She thrills at the sharp needles that comb her skin, at the secret aroma her body releases. □

CATHERINE SAVAGE BROSMAN

FATHER

Father I waken in the night afraid crying
feeling you so far from me Even in dreams
you are as if across a field and my voice
does not carry Once I saw you smiling
coming down the wooded slope toward me
everything was familiar but then I knew
that you were dead Another time I called
you from a telephone booth calling home
the lines broke the booth fell off the bank
into the Platte River The water must have
buoyed me up no comfort it carries silt
to the valleys but we are pulled toward
death Last night in my sleep I glimpsed
Grandfather gone for years that generation
goes when one is young then you Endings
seem so possible now if you are actually
dead Why not the earth too the sun cooling
a final ice age not even the birds warm
enough and all our genes lost with also
the animals Why not the whole wilderness
of stars When you went so suddenly I was
like a child of thirty-five as if I never
had heard of death before Well if loss
means anything I am grown now not ready
but at least feeling that to become part
of that stony soil with the strained wind
for company cannot be so awful since you
take your rest there now wrapped not on top
as when we camped by the stream bed but *in*
And all the things I did not do for you
lost too deader than you since they never
lived my only child not even known to you
Father I know now where I belong Berthoud
Pass Middle Park those fir-dark hills
we climbed ponderosa pine or the vastness
of the range Do you see them now in your
long sleep cool and lovely as I see them
when I dream frightened in the night far
from the sheltering forest of your love?

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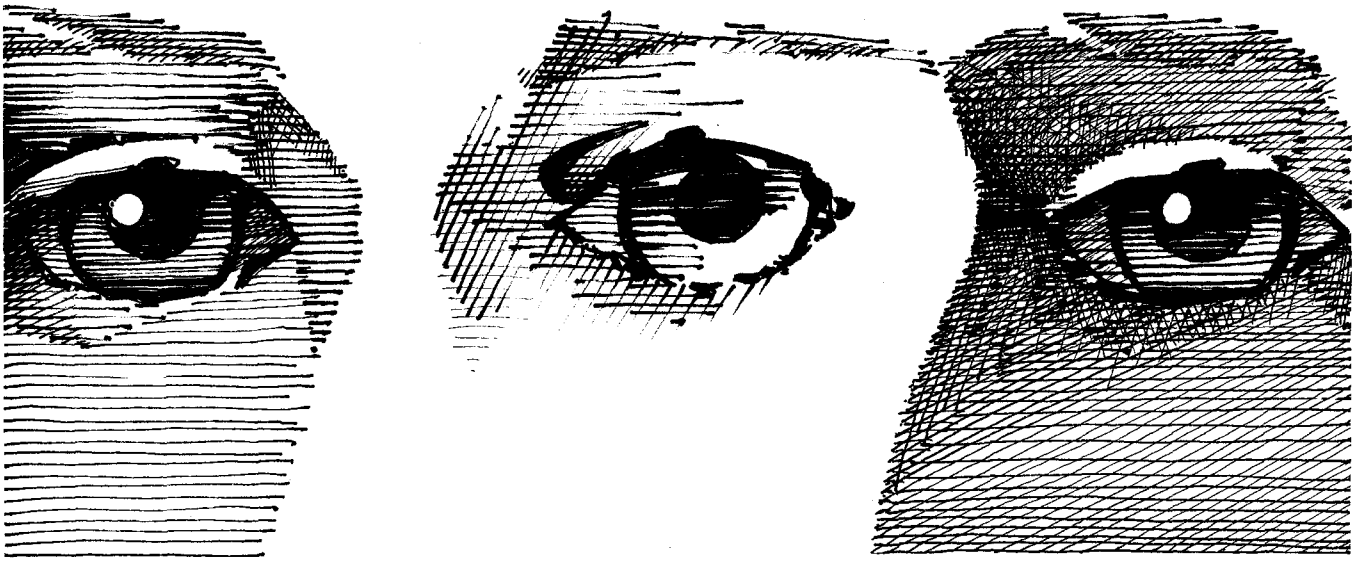
James Hall



HIBERNATION

Mary Sue Jacobs had a good husband, maybe one of the best. Notably religious, soft spoken, sincere, Lanny at age thirty-two had earned, really earned, the reputation of a good family man. He spent time playing with both their young children, John and "little Mary," each night before their bedtime, and, if that were not enough, took them fishing on the weekends. Each summer in early June he offered his services to the benefit carnival for the volunteer fire department. This lasted two weeks and meant late night hours at the booth selling tickets for the automobile raffle. And each year he bought five tickets for Mary Sue, but so far she had never won. All this was in addition to his regular job, which was selling life insurance, at which, most people in the community seemed to agree, Lanny was most competent.

And so it made sense that when Mary Sue had her nervous breakdown, Lanny was placed in charge of her medicines. There was a blue triangular pill for depression, a tiny red one for hallucinations, and a larger two-toned green one for "paranoia." Really that was a lot to keep track of, but Lanny did not seem to mind, and he never complained and always gave his wife a kiss at the breakfast table when he gave her the pills. And then he would look into her eyes and one or the other of them was apt to break into tears.

When Mary Sue had asked Dr. Rivers, her psychiatrist in Salisbury, why she could not be in charge of her own medicines, he had simply answered, "Well, I think this way is best." And then he had looked towards Lanny, who nodded his assent. Mary Sue thought it best not to push the matter, since she surely did not know much about mental illness, even her own, practically nothing compared to Dr. Rivers, who had spent most of his life working at it. All she really knew was how she felt, which was not very good, even though Dr. Rivers had said he thought she was much better after the five weeks of hospital care. He may have thought that because she had been anxious to get home to her children. She did feel quieter. But she felt a little numb, as though the world was at her finger tips but could not be brought closer. That should have made her sad, she thought, but it did not.

Once she was back home, her family clustered about her tightly and promised that she would not have to worry about a thing and that they would take care of everything. Her sister, Dotty, would keep the children for a while, until Mary Sue was stronger, and her mother would bring over food so that Mary Sue wouldn't have to cook any meal except breakfast. This seemed fine, though Mary Sue did wonder what she would do with herself all day. Then she said, "I think I will get active in the church again." Dotty and her mother exchanged glances and said that they thought it would be best if she waited until she got her "feet back on the ground." They seemed troubled by the thought of Mary Sue getting involved with the church again, and Mary Sue could not understand why, unless it was that trouble with Doris Ayers last year. Some people even thought that was what brought on Mary Sue's "illness." "I'm sure that's what did it," her mother had said. "I'm as sure as anything that's what it was." Her mother, sixty-two years old, heavy, with fading red hair, sucked in her cheeks when Mary Sue brought church up again. Dotty, who was inheriting her mother's weight, was two years older than Mary Sue, and

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agreed with her mother that Mary Sue should not "stress" herself just yet. "I don't see that helping with the church dinners would be any stress," Mary Sue had protested rather gently. Her gentleness, her brown hair and her slender good looks, had come directly from her father, Parrish, who worked on the water as a fisherman and very seldom got much involved in these intricate family affairs. That was, needless to say, one of the things that had attracted her to Lanny, his interest in family. Lanny was also slender and tall and his face almost pretty. These things counted too.

"Well," Dotty said, "you haven't forgotten the trouble with that little Doris Ayers girl, have you?" Doris Ayers was not exactly a little girl; she was thirty-one, the same age as Mary Sue. Mary Sue had not forgotten Doris Ayers or the trouble they had had last year, but neither could she muster much hostility for the girl now. They had fought over a remark which was rude ("Well," said Doris Ayers, "if I couldn't keep better track of my husband or children than you do, I might be worried too."), but which still was only a remark and hardly seemed worthy of the uncushioned rage it provoked at the time. Mary Sue had struck Doris that night (with her open hand, as hard as she could), but then, when Doris just looked at her and spit in the general direction of her feet, Mary Sue fell down and could not stop crying. Even when she got home, she could not hold back the sobs, and when they finally did stop, Mary Sue, for two days and the better part of the next night, did not utter a sound. After that, they thought they had better keep an eye on Mary Sue.

But now, a year later, the event did not seem very consequential to Mary Sue, and she said so. But Dotty and her mother had more or less preserved the fight with Doris in its original state, and they hauled it out and brushed it off whenever the subject of Mary Sue and her "breakdown" came up. And they were not at all convinced that the same trouble with the same tragic (Mary Sue was now "tragic." Before the trouble, she had always been "sweet.") results might not recur. "Oh honey, listen to us just this once. Trust your mother. We just don't think it is good for you to get too excited right now. You don't need to get back into that church business right away; they can do it without you," her mother had said. She then came over and put her arm around the neck of her second born. "Isn't that right, Lanny?" "Yes, I think it is, mom. When you are stronger, hon, then you can do anything you want. And Dr. Rivers thinks you'll be getting stronger all the time."

The first time Mary Sue suspected her husband of being unfaithful was less than a year ago. The carnival was in town and Lanny was working each night until at least eleven. The first time that Lanny was out until 2 A.M., Mary Sue was simply worried, and when Lanny got home she was enough relieved to see him that she did not question him at length. "We had a big night at the counter and had to recount all the ticket stubs before dumping them into the barrel," he said. Two nights after that, when he came home even later, he told her that someone had printed up counterfeit tickets, and that he had to go through the night's stubs and toss out the fakes. That night, after they had gone to bed, Mary Sue could not sleep. Lanny woke up just before dawn and heard her crying. She was turned on her side, facing the wall. Her slender body was throbbing, the tears coming in plangent sobs. "What's the matter, darling?" Lanny asked, very concerned. "What in the world is the matter?" Finally she said, "Lanny, I love you more than anything, and I trust you, but if anything ever happened...if I ever lost you, I would just die." "What are you talking about, honey?" "I can't help it. When you are out late like that, I just start getting these feelings. It's awful. Oh Lanny, you haven't been cheating on me have you?" Then he clutched her and held her very tightly against his body. She was facing him now and the small of her back was cupped in his right hand. Her left shoulder was in his left hand. "Honey, where in the world do you get these ideas? Don't you trust me at all? It really hurts me that you would even think something like that." He sounded hurt too. "I'm sorry, darling, really, but just tell me that you haven't been unfaithful." "Of course I haven't. My gosh, you know me better than that after all these years, don't you?" And that pretty much settled things down; only, secretly, Mary Sue was still worried.

In the morning she shouted at the children when they were slow getting ready for school. And over coffee, she thought she heard someone laughing, only she was alone. And she could not quite squelch the anger and hurt and jealousy that kept welling up inside her, no matter how hard she tried to calm herself with Lanny's reassurances. She felt very depressed, as though a great weight was inside her chest. If she took a deep breath and released it very slowly, she felt better, but only for a while. She smoked steadily throughout the morning, and with every third cigarette, she had another cup of coffee. By midday she was very distraught. Dotty called at noon. Her voice was playful, almost catty. "How's my baby sister today?" she asked. She often asked that. "I don't feel too well," Mary Sue said. "Oh, what's the matter?" Dotty inquired, sounding more concerned now. "I'd rather not talk now, really. Call me back tomorrow," Mary Sue said. "Are you going to the carnival tonight?" "No, please call another time. I don't feel well." "Oh come on and go. The kids would love it. Mom and I are going. You can go with us. Just cause Lanny is working there doesn't mean you have to stay home all alone." Mary Sue hung up the phone. She felt like she was suffocating; she was sure that Dotty had been mocking her, that Dotty knew something about Lanny that she did not know. In her mind's eye she caught the reflection of herself standing alone; she heard laughter again. This time it was louder. The laughter sounded familiar, but she could not place it. Two voices maybe.

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That night, really the next morning, Lanny came home at three.

"You goddamn lying cheating son of a bitch. You fucking two-timing ass hole. You leave me here with these two goddamn little bastards while you are out fucking some cheap little floozy. You shit. You absolute shit!" All this and more Mary Sue screamed as she packed a small overnight bag and fled the house. She could hear laughter all the while; she could hear voices that she could not quite recognize. She was shouting as much at the voices as she was at Lanny.

Lanny could not adjust to the accusations and he was mute. Later, he said it hurt him very much, what his wife had called him.

Mary Sue had no place to go but to her mother's house. When she got there, her mother was awake; Dotty was at her side. Lanny had called and said that something was wrong with Mary Sue, that she was having a breakdown or something. What should he do? "Wait," the mother had said. "She will come here."

Mary Sue told the story, as much as she knew, to her mother and sister. She said that she was sure that Lanny was "running around" on her. She was sure of it even though she did not really have proof. She was going to leave him. Dotty and her mother were very comforting; they said they were sure that Lanny was too good a person to do something like that. And that Mary Sue should not worry about it another minute. When Mary Sue insisted that she knew what she was talking about and that Lanny was definitely a cheat, Dotty said Mary Sue should be ashamed for saying things like that about her husband, who, they all knew, was as honest a person as ever lived. And, in fact, Mary Sue did feel a trickle of shame run through her. Then the laughter again, then more tears, and screaming, her anger this time directed at her mother and sister. By the time Dr. Milford arrived, she was exhausted and more or less catatonic, but he gave her the tranquilizer anyway just to be on the safe side. Then Lanny arrived, out of breath, pale, shaken, but anxious to "do anything he could." When Dr. Milford got the story from the family, he called Dr. Rivers, the psychiatrist in Salisbury, forty miles north. They all agreed that it would be the best thing for Mary Sue to be brought to the hospital at once for "rest and treatment." Mary Sue looked to be asleep and, in any event, did not resist. "Just hurry up and get well," Lanny said, as he said good-by to Mary Sue at the hospital. "Just get well and come home." Then he kissed her on the forehead, but her eyes were still closed and she did not move.

Dr. Rivers seemed very understanding. He had reason to be: insanity had struck his own household. His wife, Myrna, had been in and out of institutions for several years, then finally, for the last three years, just in. "My affliction" he called it, Myrna's problem, in his private thoughts. He had been faithful to her all those years, even now visited every Sunday the deathly grey state hospital, its heavy somber walls sufficient reason in themselves for insanity. It struck Dr. Rivers as ironical that those requiring the most beauty around them got the least. But then, he could have placed her in a private institution. That seemed such a waste.

He even seemed to understand the laughter, Mary Sue thought, and the voices. He nodded; he said "uh-huh" when she told him how she could hear them, how she sometimes felt incandescent, explosive. "Am I going crazy?" she asked. "Do you feel that you are?" he answered, his gaze steady upon her left shoulder. He was handsome, greying, distinguished; in the movies he would have been a senator, Mary Sue thought. Or maybe a judge. "Your Honor," she once said accidentally, but caught herself and blushed. She could tell by his stiffening that he had not got the connection. She would not elaborate. Then he would know I am crazy for sure, she thought. All in all, though, Dr. Rivers inspired confidence. She trusted him. "After all," she told herself, "I have to trust someone, because I surely don't know anything about mental illness, except that I have it." That much she had overheard on the ward. That much she could figure out for herself.

They met twice a day, Dr. Rivers and Mary Sue, once quickly on morning rounds, and then in the afternoon for almost an hour of what they called "individual psychotherapy." That only lasted two weeks and then she was placed in "group therapy." She found that unpleasant; she did not really enjoy listening to the problems of people she hardly knew. "Am I as bad as all that?" she would ask herself approximately three times each session. "I would like to get out of the group. I would like to see you privately again," she told Dr. Rivers one day after the group had adjourned and she had hung back struggling with her shoelaces. "How long have you felt that way?" Dr. Rivers asked. "From the beginning." "Well, maybe that is something we could talk about with the group, your feelings about being in the group," Dr. Rivers said. She could feel a long stream of pain burn its way through her abdomen and percolate up into her chest. She felt nauseous.

Two weeks later she said that she wanted to go home. "Do you think you are ready?" Dr. Rivers asked. "Yes, I think so." "I am glad you are anxious to leave," Dr. Rivers said, "but still I think it would be a good idea for you to stay a few days longer." "I don't understand why. I can take the pills at home." "I know you can." "Then can I go?" "Not just yet." "But I don't hear the noises anymore. I am not paranoid any more. I feel tired. That's all." She had felt tired since she had been on the medication. Tired and just slightly imprisoned by a thin spiderweb of a curtain, and just, perhaps, slightly anesthetized. Still, it was quite a relief from some of the things she had been feeling before she came in. She was grateful for that.

The next week, when she did get to go home, Lanny was there to pick her up and take her home. The children were to stay with Dotty for a while until Mary Sue was stronger. "She has schizophrenia," Dr. Rivers told Lanny, when he met with him privately in his office on the day of her discharge. "Is that bad?" Lanny asked. "In some ways it is. We can't cure it, but with the proper medicines, we can control it, and hopefully, keep her out of institutions." Lanny seemed remarkably strong under the circumstances. "I am putting you in charge of the medicines. It will be safer that way. The instructions are on the bottles. I would like to

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see her back here in three weeks for an office visit." "Of course." "The secretary will give you an appointment card." "What causes it, Doc?" Dr. Rivers almost laughed at that one. "Nobody knows. It's a great mystery in psychiatry. Maybe it's body chemistry; maybe it's genes. Nobody knows." "Will the kids get it?" "Very unlikely."

The second time Mary Sue suspected Lanny of being unfaithful was two months after her discharge from the hospital. There was a phone call early in the evening, and the caller, a young girl, hung up after Mary Sue told her that Lanny was not home. The girl seemed startled that Mary Sue had answered. Mary Sue tried to shrug the call off. Then, without her control, she could feel the suspicions stirring in her like some animal roused from hibernation. She took an extra green pill, but it did not have time to work. The girl's voice was familiar, but out of reach. It shrank from her mental lunges. The anger puddled in Mary Sue, then chopped and whipped like a sea lifted by hurricane winds. She collapsed in despair. "I am going crazy again," she told herself. "I will get a grip on myself." Surprisingly it worked. At least enough that when Lanny came home, she was more or less in possession of herself. "You had a phone call," she said as calmly as she could. "Who was it?" Lanny asked, not looking up from the mail. "A young girl." Lanny's eyes unfocused, but the direction of his gaze did not change. "Who was it?" he asked again. "Did his voice change then, or did I imagine that too?" Mary Sue asked herself. "She didn't give her name. In fact, she sounded surprised when I answered the phone. She hung up as soon as I told her you were not home." "That's strange," Lanny said. "That's just what I thought," replied Mary Sue. There was a sharpening edge to her voice despite her extra pill, despite her best efforts at harnessing her feelings. "Honey...," Lanny said. "What?" "You're not going to get sick on me again, are you?" No answer. "Did you take your pills today?" "You gave them to me." "I didn't watch you take them, though." "Don't you trust me?" "Don't you trust *me*?" "Who is the girl, Lanny?" "Probably someone from work." "I wouldn't doubt that." "You know what Dr. Rivers said. You shouldn't get yourself upset, you know." "I know. That's what everyone keeps telling me." "It sounds to me like you are getting paranoid again." "That's cheating, Lanny. You know that's cheating." "I have not been cheating. I was hoping you would trust me by now." "That's not what I meant, Lanny." "I'm sorry, dear. It's hard to tell what you mean sometimes now. Don't you think you should get some rest now? You look very tired. You know the doctor wants you to get plenty of rest."

She did feel tired—exhausted, in fact. And though she took a blue pill and went to sleep immediately, she was wide awake at three A.M., her mind humming like an electric watch. There was something sadly disarrayed in her life other than herself. She knew it; the pieces were there, but she could not get them to fit together. She was one of the pieces. She could not be both a piece of the puzzle and the solver of the puzzle. She needed help. She had already had help. Before she sank into a despair so numbing that it would pass for sleep, she felt a message ooze from somewhere inside herself. "Does Lanny really want me well?" the message read. "Does anyone?"

The next morning she put the pills in the toilet. She did that with each dose for the rest of the week. By the week's end she was tingling inside, as though her nerves were awakening from a long sleep, as though her entire body had been numbed for an extraction. "What has been extracted?" she asked herself. "And what is left of me?" For the next several days she inventoried her emotions. Food tasted better. Was that an emotion? Taste? She laughed. Was humor? There was, at first, a revivified warmth for Lanny, as though she had just returned from a lengthy separation. Surprisingly to her, he seemed slightly unnerved by her display of feeling. "Have you been drinking?" he asked her, when she had been making romantic advances upon his feet. She laughed, but stopped what she had been doing.

The second telephone call caught Mary Sue off guard. The same girl's voice and she hung up as quickly as she had the first time. Mary Sue's rage was unchecked. There was a roaring in her head, a thundering of electrified synapses. It was too much for her body to contain. "Have you been taking your medicines like you were supposed to? Tell me the truth this time," Lanny said, when the worst of it was over. "I haven't taken a pill in two weeks," Mary Sue said defiantly. "They weren't helping me. They were just making me all dead inside. I'll never take them again." "But the doctor thinks you should." "Screw him. He's as bad as the rest of you. All you want is for me to be nice and keep my mouth shut. To act normal, while you run around and do whatever the hell pleases you. None of you want me to be well." "Oh honey, not again, please not again," Lanny said. "Please try to get control of yourself." It was too late for that. And the force that was required to subdue her, to get her into the ambulance and back to the hospital, surprised even Dotty. "I always knew she used to be a good little athlete, but I didn't know she was anywhere near that strong now." Her mother shook her head at that. She too was amazed at her daughter's strength.

"It is not unusual for schizophrenics to distrust people like that," Dr. Rivers said to Lanny. "It is just part of the disease process. You mustn't let it get to you. One thing: if we can't cure her, we can at least keep her illness from affecting everyone around her. I think we can keep it in check, keep it from destroying the entire family." Lanny seemed comforted by that. "Please do everything you can, doctor. I just want her back to her old self." "I will do my best. I think she will get along fine if we can just keep her on her medicines. She responded very nicely to therapy the first time around. We'll just have to be a bit more careful this time."

And ten days later at the time of discharge, Dr. Rivers said much the same thing to Lanny while Mary Sue was standing there beside him. "If she will just be a good girl and trust us and stay on her medicines, I think she will get along fine." And when Mary Sue said, "I'm not so sure," Dr. Rivers patted her on the shoulder reassuringly. His hand felt very hot to her shoulder, even through her heavy blue coat. The checkered patterns of the linoleum floor danced miraculously before her eyes. She hardly knew where to step. □

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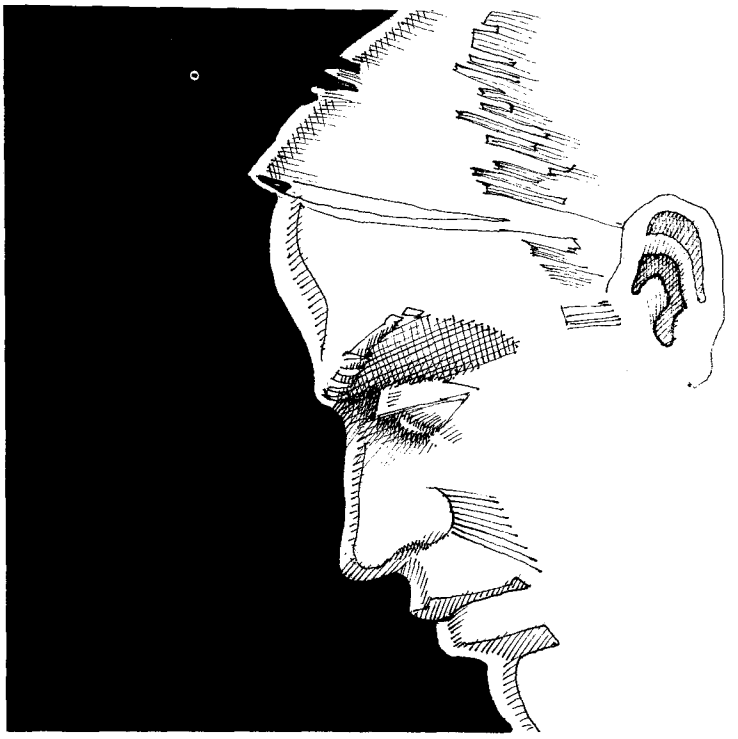
Mark Halliday



MRS. HUNGATE'S QUESTION

Kate Perry, a musician and gardener with a challenging smile and wise hands, divorced her husband after five years of marriage because he ignored their sons, Richard and Peter. She raised them alone and gave them her original last name which she had never relinquished. Sixteen years later, after an agonized two-year struggle, she died of cancer. Her body was cremated, and her sons rejected the idea of a memorial service in a church, because her lifelong scorn of religion forbade it.

A week later, Peter Perry sat in a summer dusk listening to the dozen people who had gathered on his uncle's backyard patio to honor his mother's memory. After the buffet supper there would be a little ceremony; for now, people balanced plates of chicken casserole and potato salad and spoke of other things.

"I know a lot of retired people who aren't happy," said Mrs. Farley. She was addressing the Hungates, a white-haired couple in their seventies. Mrs. Hungate had been Kate Perry's piano teacher for eight years, in the 1930s. The Hungates nodded tentatively and Mr. Hungate picked up his glass of iced tea and poked at the lemon slice with a stiff finger. Mrs. Farley quickly pursued her meaning: "People who don't know what to do without their careers, I mean. Even if their work was, you know, nothing, I mean even if it was the most boring job in the world." Mrs. Farley crossed her legs and jiggled the top leg, making her white leather sandal flap rhythmically against her heel.

Bob Perry, Peter's uncle, had been listening and hitched his lawn chair closer to the Hungates, scraping its aluminum frame across the gray flagstones of the patio, the noise announcing his intention to enter the conversation. Mrs. Farley glanced at him hopefully—she knew she had caused an awkwardness but had momentarily blanked on how she might ease it or change the subject. The Hungates kept their eyes lowered, as if thinking of something far away, but Peter, who watched from the porch steps, was sure that they too were anxious to hear from Bob. Bob was a strong, freckled, smooth-spoken man, younger brother of the deceased woman, a successful economist, a man constantly considering more sensible ways of doing things, but also a man who thought about meaning. He was in charge of tonight's ceremony and he wanted it to mean something. Peter watched his uncle's earnest involvement and admired it, but felt it as permanently alien to him. Peter's mother was dead now and could no longer summon him into the confusions of living with people.

"That's the great thing about your work, though," Bob said to the Hungates, "you can go right on with it. There's no retirement age."

"As long as our fingers remember how to move," said Mrs. Hungate, smiling philosophically. She still gave piano lessons, and her husband continued to work as a cabinetmaker at home, though he had turned over his shop to his apprentices seven years ago.

"Well, that's what I'm saying," Mrs. Farley proclaimed, nodding vigorously at Bob. "Most people don't *like* their work, so when they retire—or when they stop needing a big income, you know—well, they're absolutely *lost*." She paused to assess the effect of her speech. Bob was nodding back at her. She gave herself a little hug for regaining her poise in the conversation. "But if you can do an *art*—well, that's totally different. Totally. What's so nice about an art—like music, or, you know, any kind of craft work"—Mrs. Farley was vague on the nature of Mr. Hungate's

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profession—"is that it goes *on*, it just goes on. An art just doesn't stop." Mrs. Farley sat back in her yellow lawn chair and jiggled her sandal contentedly. She had navigated through the conversation to a profundity.

Peter stopped listening as his uncle prompted Mr. Hungate to talk about the intricate miniature walnut bureaus he had begun this week. Mr. Hungate was proud of his skill, but modesty had deepened in him for perhaps forty years now and he could no longer generate any excitement about his work. Peter saw the old man's lips moving but could not make out the words; not because Mr. Hungate was speaking softly but because Peter had drifted away in his head, retired to a silent spot miles away from the chatty patio. His mother could not now say, "Peter, honey, get with it, mix a little, people want to know what's on that mind of yours."

Peter rubbed his eyes slowly with his fingertips, methodically, trying to be gentle with them even though he felt a perverse sort of anger at his eyes for seeing what they saw. It was all right, after all, this gathering, his uncle's idea of a ceremony after dinner. The ashes. Sprinkling the ashes. It would mean nothing, it would lead nowhere, but it was all right; no reason to loathe any of these people, no reason to look down on them from some cold peak of silence. His mother would have appreciated all the attention tonight—she would have protested, but she would have been glad, covertly, seeing all her oldest friends together here beneath the two oaks, beside the row of tumultuous rose bushes which she had taught her "baby sister" Cynthia to care for.

Peter ceased rubbing his eyes but kept his fingertips against his eyelids, feeling the redness around his eyes, and sensing how the whites of his eyes were streaked with tiny streams of blood just beneath the surface. Maybe Bob would see his red eyes and guess, mistakenly, that he was stoned. Peter twinged with regret, thinking how Bob would be hurt to see Peter removing himself from the evening's activity. If Bob were twenty-five years younger, he still would never get stoned. He would be too busy doing things the sensible way, organizing people to function smoothly together, and thinking about meaning. At least I'm not stoned tonight, Peter thought, wishing this fact could somehow be known to his uncle and cheer him. Maybe these people think my eyes are red because I have cried for my mother . . . Peter wished this were simply true.

He glanced at Richard, his older brother, who sat with Aunt Cynthia and others at the longer of the two picnic tables eating a second helping of the chicken casserole. Richard did not look at all somber, but in his own way he was rising to the occasion, as usual—like his recently adopted hero, Jesus, rising to the occasion—entertaining several of the guests with appreciations of the food, news of his plans for divinity school, and anecdotes about All-Sports Day Camp, of which he was the director. Richard's listeners were grateful to him for allowing them to feel that they were in touch with the family, in touch with Kate Perry through her charming elder son, and that it was appropriate to be convivial and loud during this dinner. Presently—it might have happened already—someone would ask Richard how Peter was doing as Landsports Counselor at the day camp, and Richard would slide into his gently mocking monologue about Peter's performance. Peter's insistence on soccer practice for the kids at the expense of softball, football and volleyball; Peter's attempt to converse with nine-year-olds as if they were adults, telling them that soccer was the main sport of the Third World; Peter's forgetfulness in matters of scheduling, so that he often took two hours off after lunch instead of one; Peter's tendency to fade away during staff meetings. . . .

Laughter bloomed over the picnic table and Peter stared through the darkening air at their faces to see if they were indeed laughing at one of Richard's tales about "my spaced-out kid brother". No one glanced at Peter on the porch steps. The laughter renewed itself. I am not here, Peter thought. Suddenly he found himself upright and walking stiffly toward the buffet table.

"Isn't this chicken stuff terrific?" It was Mr. Burnham, the druggist who had been—or so Aunt Cynthia contended—in love with Kate Perry.

"Yes sir," said Peter. Then, repelled by his own dishonesty: "Actually, I haven't tried it yet."

"You better hurry up, Pete, most of us are on our seconds already."

"I know. But I think I'm just thirsty right now." Without looking again at the druggist Peter fixed himself a vodka-and-tonic. If he tells me my mother was a terrific woman, Peter thought, I'll throw my drink in his face.

"Good, good," said Mr. Burnham, making an effort to chuckle. "We've got a lot of booze to use up tonight."

"Yes sir," said Peter. He knew the man didn't want to be called "sir"—more than once Mr. Burnham had shaken hands with Richard and Peter and said: "I'm just George to you"—but Peter kept the word "sir" between himself and this graying, benevolent little man like a shield, or a sword.

Mr. Burnham was still unwilling to walk away with his new load of chicken. "How's life at the day camp these days? What's it like working for your big brother?" Mr. Burnham grinned, inviting a jibe at Richard. It was a generous set-up: Peter could come back with a remark about Richard's officiousness, or his hapless campaign to infuse a Christian flavor into the rowdy routine of the day camp—but Peter only said, "It's not too bad. He leaves me alone, mostly."

Mr. Burnham could not think where to go with this statement so he merely said: "That's good. You guys make a great team." He paused. Peter expected the usual question about his jazz group now. But the druggist was too uncomfortable meeting Peter's red eyes and he retired with his second helping, and Peter remained at the table and stood with his back to the assemblage and drank his vodka-and-tonic without stopping.

He was mixing his third drink when Richard put a hand on his shoulder and said: "Bob figures we'll do the ashes in a few minutes. Most people are through eating."

"I don't want to do it."

"Petie, come on, don't fade out on this. It means something to these people. It means something to us."

"Like what?"

Richard looked at him the way he looked at a small boy who was afraid to jump into water that wasn't even over his head. "Listen, Petie, I was just talking with Cynthia about it, about the ashes. You realize that they're full of nutrients, you know. Mrs. Stoltz was saying she hoped the ashes wouldn't hurt the roses and Cynthia explained that it's really

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like a fertilizer. Just because they've been burned, you know, doesn't mean they can't have nutrients."

"Oh, Christ," said Peter through his teeth.

"What?"

Peter said nothing, stirred his drink.

"Petie, I wish you would make up your mind to *participate* in this thing. This is an important night for us."

Peter drank, and said: "Jesus H. Christ." He knew how to hurt his brother.

"Petie. If you don't agree with me, you can say so. But don't swear like that. Not to me."

Peter looked at his brother and tried to show with his eyes that he didn't want a fight; still, he had to say: "I can't believe that Jesus cares what we call him. Mother called him 'a charismatic left-wing demagogue,' didn't she?"

"She wasn't saying things like that in her last days," Richard declared portentously.

"She wasn't saying much of anything in her last days," said Peter, "except 'It hurts' and 'Are you boys eating enough?'"

"Okay. Listen. Bob's going to give his speech, then I'm going to read my poem. Then Bob hands each of us a bag and we just sprinkle it under the bushes, that's all."

"Isn't Cynthia going to sing?"

"No. She decided not to."

Peter nodded and looked away from Richard, studying the deep black-purple of the western sky. He was glad his aunt would not sing. There should be no music tonight.

Or maybe there should be music. Why not? Anything.

Peter took his drink into the house and sat alone in the bright empty kitchen. Soon there would be a silence outside, then Bob's voice. Peter drank and waited.

He heard someone climbing the porch and opening the screen door. A posse, he thought. He refused to look up.

"Hello, Peter." It was Mrs. Hungate. "Taking a little rest, are you?"

"I guess so."

She looked at him thoughtfully, taking her time, as if wishing that he were ten years younger, and that she herself were forty years younger, so that she could take care of him; but she knew very well how old they both were, she knew she could not protect him, and Peter felt a surprised gratitude to her for urging nothing upon him.

Mrs. Hungate scraped left-over food off plates into the garbage. She said: "How is your jazz group doing?"

It was the same old question they all asked. But for some reason Peter felt willing to answer this time. "Well, we learned a lot of new stuff this month, and we got a guitarist. But our clarinet man is quitting."

"Why?"

"Going away to school."

"That's a good reason, I suppose," said Mrs. Hungate. Her movements in handling the dishes were slow and careful; she knew these little tasks very well but her hands were old and she seemed to suspect they might relax suddenly and drop a dish on the floor. But they didn't. As the minutes passed she brought order to the crowded counters beside the sink. "And what about you?" she asked.

"Me?"

"Your organ-playing. Do you still like it?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you going to keep it up?"

Peter felt a wave of exhaustion flattening him as he tried to choose an answer to Mrs. Hungate's question. At the same time he became aware that he was drunk and might not be able to speak clearly. He cleared his throat.

"Well," said Mrs. Hungate, "I hope you do. As long as you can put yourself into it. We'd better get back out there, Peter. We're starting."

He had no choice but to follow her through the screen door, across the porch, to the circle of chairs on the patio.

Bob's speech was short and very earnest. He spoke of Kate's love of life, her will to live, the compassion she always showed for others . . . Bob refrained from mentioning Richard and Peter in the speech, and it was not until Bob sat down that Peter realized he had been cringing in anticipation of some remark about how "her sons are the living evidence of her ability to share her great strengths."

Richard read his poem loudly and clearly, though a quaver entered his voice during a verse that referred specifically to their mother, her love of gardening. It was a good poem, Peter supposed, but he was unable to concentrate on it. He wondered if Richard had enjoyed writing it.

Then Bob placed a small white cloth sack in his hands. It was heavy—so much heavier than he expected that Peter almost dropped it. There was no escape. He followed his brother and his uncle to the huge dark rose bushes.

The ashes slid heavily and softly from the bags onto the earth beneath the bushes. Ashes, Peter thought, these are ashes. But they were so fine, like a powder, like a perfect dust.

There was a silence; then a few awkward remarks that Peter did not register; then a gradually developing bustle as everyone decided it was time to clean up. Richard approached him, solicitous. "That felt good, didn't it? Somehow the idea of nourishing the roses—like she is still taking care of them—"

Peter was suddenly grinning, strangely, his head thick with alcohol, and he muttered back: "I'm not going to kill myself."

"What?"

Peter just grinned. Maybe Richard had heard, maybe not. They could talk later, when the alcohol had left his blood.

Minutes later Peter was watching as Richard, being efficient and muscular, ascended the porch carrying two kitchen chairs, one under each arm, and a large glass pitcher in one hand. Richard reached the screen door and could not open it without putting down part of his load.

"Can't I help you?" said Mrs. Hungate. She edged past him and opened the screen door. But Richard still couldn't fit through with his two chairs and the pitcher. "Here," said Mrs. Hungate, "give me the pitcher."

"Oh, that's all right," said Richard, the All-Sports director, tirelessly gallant. "I can make it." He bumped a chair against the door-frame.

"Richard," said Mrs. Hungate, "don't be silly, you must let me help. Give me that pitcher."

Richard let her take the pitcher.

"Good boy," she said. "Can you make it now?"

Richard maneuvered through the doorway with the two chairs. Peter smiled drunkenly in the dark. □

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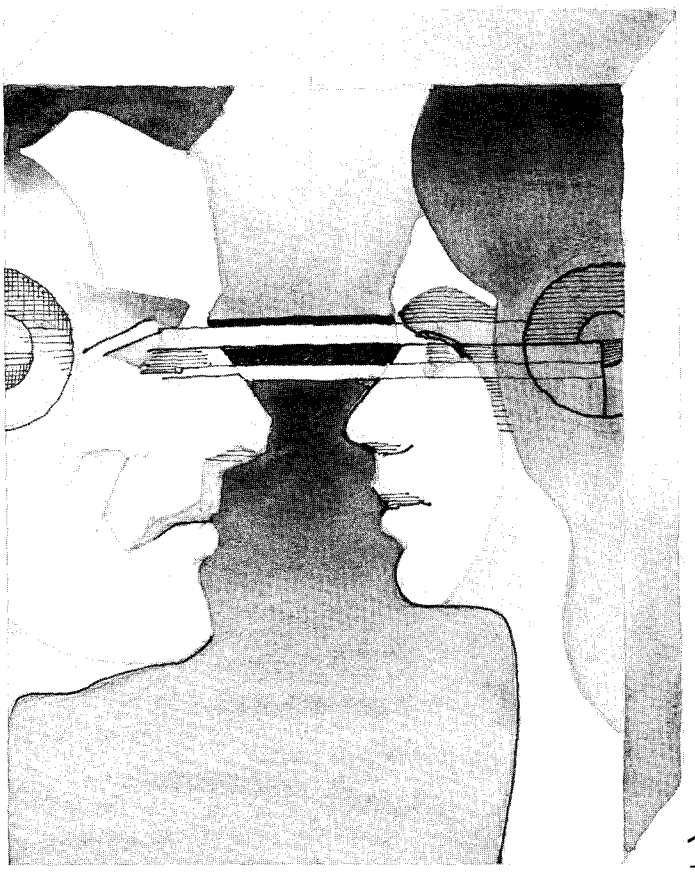
George V. Higgins



TWO DONNELLY STORIES

1. WARM FOR SEPTEMBER

Donnelly always called Carolyn Busby at the paper when he was in Boston, and they always met for drinks downstairs at the Parker House.

"I know I don't," she said, when the waiter brought the second round.

"You ought to do something about it," Donnelly said.

"*You're* getting fat," she said. "You ought to do something about that."

"There's only one thing I can do about getting fat, and I'm already doing that," Donnelly said. "The trouble is that it isn't working, and it won't work either, because my problem isn't what I eat."

"It's what you drink," she said.

"Not that, either," Donnelly said. "My problem is that I'm getting old, and therefore getting soft. My weight's actually about the same as it was the last time I saw you. When was that, in the spring?"

"Uhh," she said, "Let me think. It was before I went to St. Louis for him, wasn't it? Did I tell you about St. Louis?"

"No," he said.

"Then it was before I went to St. Louis," she said, "because I know I would've told you about that if it'd been after. Must've been the first part of May."

"Then I'm right," Donnelly said. "My weight's been the same since I moved to Silver Spring and finally got myself a bathroom scale again after five years. One-eighty-six."

"You look fatter," she said.

"What I am is softer," he said. "Out of shape."

"Better watch it," she said. "The young stuff'll lose interest if you're not careful. A dirty old man's one thing, but a paunchy dirty old man, I don't know. You're liable to wind up having to pay for it."

"Nope," Donnelly said, "it doesn't do any good. The only thing you can do is look on, helplessly. The only cure for what I've got is youth, and that's not available on my salary. When I was thirty I had the body of a thirty-year-old, and I wasn't surprised that it sagged a little more than the one they were letting me use when I was twenty and playing basketball. Now I'm forty-two, and it doesn't surprise me at all that I've got a forty-two-year-old's body. Oh, I'll tighten it up some when I get back down there and start playing handball three times a week again, but it's a losing proposition. Now, your thing's something you could do something about, if it interested you. With you it's just inertia."

"It's more'n that," she said. "I don't do anything about it because I honestly can't think of anything to do. It isn't that I haven't thought about it, because I have. I think about it when I get up in the morning, and then for some reason, when I get to work and see him there in his usual place, I don't think about it. If I have to go out on something, I don't think about it, and as a matter of fact, I don't think about it until after I leave. If I'm not seeing him. If I'm seeing him, I don't think about it until after he leaves. But I go to sleep thinking about it, and I wake up thinking about it, about

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what I could do to make it better, and there isn't a single, solitary thing. Nothing. Must be love, I guess."

"I thought love was supposed to have beneficial effects," Donnelly said. "Firms up the step, brightens the eye and gives you a shiny coat. You just look tired."

"I am tired," she said. "It just wears you out, being in this kind of situation. No, it's not love. I haven't been in love, if that's how you tell, since I was twenty-four."

"Oh dear," Donnelly said, "and I was all set to receive a compliment."

"And that only lasted about, oh, I guess it was a little over two months," she said. "I fell in love with Michael because I thought he was the nicest guy I ever met in my life, ever would meet, and I guess he was, but my *God*, he was boring. He was good-looking, he was successful, he worked for Cyrus Vance and he was always dashing off to Washington again after two days of a three-day weekend that he had to postpone four times before he finally made it, and he introduced me to Robert McNamara and got me the special tour of the White House. I smoked twice as much for a month afterwards, so I could show off all hundred and fifty packs of matches I stole from the White House Mess. But when I was alone with him, and I thought at that stage of my development that he was good in bed too, when I was alone with him I was so bored I was just about paralyzed. God, if I'd ever married him I would've been catatonic in a year. I don't see how he did it, all the things he did and the people he knew, and still be the most boring man in the world. Now you can say what you want about Marshall, and that hanging around with him's making me look like hell, as you so pleasantly put it, but one thing he isn't is boring. She had a detective on him last week."

Donnelly laughed. "What hell's she doing that for?" he said. "I thought part of the problem was that she didn't want a divorce."

"She doesn't know what she wants," Carolyn said. "But he doesn't seem to know what he wants, either, although there are times when I'm quite sure he does, and that he just doesn't find it convenient to share his little secret with me. I think she'd just like to get something on him, because it might be useful."

"If he knows what he wants, and he's not telling," Donnelly said, "that means he's got what he wants and he's afraid telling'd spoil it. And that means you're in even more trouble than I thought when I started in on you."

"When you started in on me," Carolyn Busby said, "I was in minimum trouble."

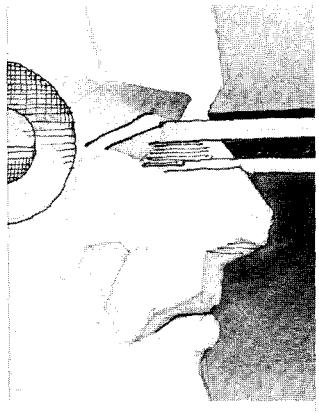
"Oh come off it," Donnelly said.

"I *was*, Mike," she said. "I could handle the shit I was getting then, and I could handle us. I don't mean you screwed me up. You didn't screw me up at all. I'm simply saying that I could handle the problems I had then, without very much trouble. They were smaller problems. But now I've got big problems, and what I learned in peaceful combat with you, and not-so-courteous treatment from others, just doesn't help me very much in what I'm in now. And to be very honest with you, since you were rude enough to bring it up in the first place, I could use some help."

"Do you want to get married again?" Donnelly said.

"That'd be something, wouldn't it?" she said. "I can just hear all the crap I'd have to take, after the stuff I've written. Jesus, it'd have to be to a woman if I did, some bitch with a leather dildo, or I'd never hear the end of it. I guess I'm not really sure," she said. "Do you?"

"Nope," Donnelly said, "I'm too old to get married again. Of course I'm also too old to be single again too. It's been very hard, trying to get used to it. But I'm getting used to it, and I've got all the time and energy invested in it, four years, after all, and I'm not sure I've got the stamina to turn



around and get used to being married again. Besides, I'm reasonably satisfied with things the way they are."

"Sam's okay?" she said.

"If you and I," Donnelly said, "were doing as well as Sam is, we'd have God in His Heaven and the lark on the wing. Gail's second litter, Tom's kids, think Sam's, I don't know, that Sam's wonderful, and he takes care of them and he gets a big bang out of it. Makes him feel good. Gail's done a marvelous job with him."

"You're lucky to be able to say that," Carolyn said. "When I was going with Ed, there were quite a few nights when he came back to the apartment literally in tears about the way his ex-wife was manhandling the kids. And making them hate him, incidentally, of course. A little kick in the balls for Daddy, for walking out. Now that was exhausting, too, the pity's-love bit. I'm not going to do that again, either. There're quite a few things I'm not going to do again, and that's very solid on the list. Along with duty's-love, horniness-is-love, and we've-got-the-same-politics-so-we-must-be-in-love. Well, maybe I'll do horniness-is-love again. But not the others. It depends."

"Good God, I should hope so," Donnelly said.

"Well," she said, "I'm not so sure. I might, but then again, I might not. The simplicity of it is nice. Nobody expects anything from anybody, except frequent and relaxing orgasms, and nobody gets in anybody's way. But then there's nobody in the world that cares about you. And pretty soon, when you get the blues and under the rules of no burdens, you can't talk about them, or you're not supposed to, anyway, you have to keep them, and that means the other party doesn't get what he's entitled to in the bargain. Which is really a series of one-night stands that just happen to be with the same person every night. I don't like going to bed with strangers, even with a stranger I've been living with for six months or so. You get your cookies, but that's all you get, and after a while you're not getting your cookies anymore, as a result."

"Someone to take care of you?" Donnelly said.

"Only when I'm very tired," she said, "and very

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insecure, and lonely and worried and lonesome, and feeling little."

"That, for me," Donnelly said, "happens about three times a week, and I get up and put on that Sinatra record that's got 'Someone To Watch Over Me' on it, and then 'The Wee Small Hours Of The Morning,' and I get fairly maudlin."

"Then what do you do?" she said. "This may be useful information. I've been using the FM for that."

"It won't work," Donnelly said. "When you need 'Yesterday,' all you can get is a bunch of mazurkas. And when you need some genuine treacle, some Andy Williams stuff, to make your mood so sad you can even begin to laugh at it yourself, they give you Mozart piano and you just collapse. You've got to be able to tailor it, control what you're getting, learn your own tolerances and cater to your weaknesses. That's the trick."

"Isn't that what I've been doing, that gets me into trouble?" she said. "Catering to my weaknesses?"

"Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't," Donnelly said. "Now those disgustingly-youthful types at the bar, who'd scorn me, and the boys that'd grab you. . . ."

"Yeah," she said.

"True," Donnelly said. "They've been watching you."

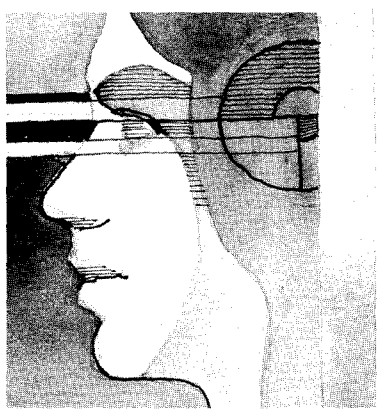
"Sure," she said, "wondering if I'm a quick lay, and if I am, never mind how I look. 'All cats're black in the dark.' Didn't I hear somebody say that once?"

"You did a number or two on me, too," Donnelly said. "What I was going to say, I had to fight back with something, you know, for Christ sake. Twelve years was it, you said? That was nice of you. Let's we just try and keep in mind what happened five years ago, and how come that ended."

"You had something to do with that, you know," Carolyn said.

"Never said I didn't," Donnelly said. "Another thing I didn't do, and I haven't done it since, was start blaming you for what I did."

"There were too many problems there," she said.



"There were," Donnelly said, "and most of them were mine, and I didn't handle them very well. I wasn't handling them very well. But I didn't say they were your fault, and I didn't go around pretending they weren't doing damage, and I didn't go out of my way to be nasty when you couldn't take the damage anymore, which happens to be the reason we ended up the way we did, and you know it."

"I don't happen to think so," she said. "The way I remember it, you were getting divorced or separated or some other damned thing, and the more I saw of the way you were acting, the more I was damned sure you didn't mean it, and you'd go back to her in a minute if she looked at you cross-eyed, and I figured the next thing that was going to happen was that she would, and you would, and then you'd move out again, and then you'd move back again, and then you'd move out again, and I just couldn't face it."

"That's what I said," Donnelly said.

"What you said didn't sound like that was what you were saying," she said.

"Well," Donnelly said, "that's what I said."

"That's what you said, then," she said. "It doesn't matter to me."

"It matters to me," Donnelly said. "It matters more to me because it sure-God ought to matter to you. What the hell's the matter with you?"

She sighed. She looked down at the table when she answered. "It's been a hot day," she said. "It was close to ninety. I've been up at the State House all day, trying to get a straight answer in an election year from some politician who's so scared he'll lose if he tells the truth that he won't say it for attribution, that the people who wouldn't let Kennedy speak about busing, and tried to beat up on him and threw fruit at him, are a bunch of goddamned animals and the best reason anybody in the world could think of to write laws that do exactly what they don't want done. It's warm for September. I can't stand humidity. You know that. It makes me sticky and mad."

"Uh huh," Donnelly said.

"That St. Louis trip was a bummer," she said. She clenched her teeth and started talking through them. "It was nothing more'n a sweetheart piece. Marshall got a letter from somebody who was in Porcellian with him, and this fellow was making a film, a television film for the Bicentennial celebration, and Marshall decided he was going to give the kid a freebie on the feature page. Marshall also decided that the freebie was going to be done by me. A nice trip out of town for Star Writer. Also, something else. I think her name's Mary Lou. She works at the *Globe*.

"So I did it," she said. "Now, I was underwhelmed. St. Louis late in May. Like a steam bath. But I went. And I met this asshole, this absolute asshole, who's thirty-two years old and there is absolutely no shape to his face at all. It's just flesh, just pink, round, unmarked flesh. I bet he doesn't shave twice a month. And he works in a bank. He's an executive vice-president in this big bank. 'I'm in Finance,' he says, and there's only, oh, maybe sixty other jerks like him making fifteen thousand a year kissing the real boss's ass, all executive vice-presidents, of course, because their families've got money and they haven't got any brains and they don't need any. The boss's got brains; his name is Horace Royce, and he's an old pirate who uses those guys to wipe his feet on, and they *revere* him for it. 'Gawd,' they say, 'marvelous old man.' He could've run Buchenwald, and they'd help him and say the same thing.

"Well," she said, "Marshall's friend had another friend in town for the week. His name was Peter and he was about twenty, and his connection was that Marshall's friend and Peter went to Exeter, but not at the same time, and Peter'd just gotten into Porcellian, and Peter came from Louisville,

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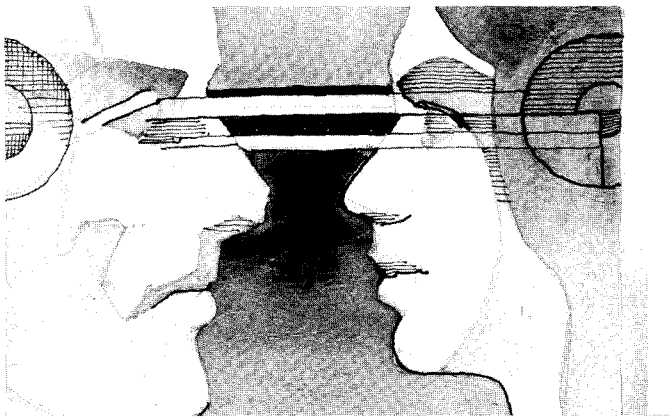
and Peter was going into *Finance*, and he wanted to locate in the mid-*South*, and somebody at Porcellian'd given his name to Marshall's friend, and Marshall's friend was introducing him to his contacts. Now Marshall's friend was *sure* that I'd adore Peter, or maybe I was supposed to adore him, it wasn't very clear, and also Mister Royce, and this pear-shaped woman that Marshall and Marshall's friend had known for ages, ever since she was at Miss Porter's. So before I could see this extraordinary movie—'Very talented fellow,' Marshall told me, 'not just that he's a friend of mine, but a very talented fellow, absolute banking genius,' but Mister Royce doesn't think so; Mister Royce wouldn't trust Marshall's friend with the stamp money—I had to have lunch with these twerps, and then drinks with these twerps, and then dinner with these twerps and this dull, dull woman, who does weaving and they all talked about how they were going to 'summer' on Martha's Vineyard, and perhaps I could join them there for a drink. Oh yeah, I could just see that. And cheap? The bill for cocktails came to eight-oh-five, and Marshall's friend and Peter divided it up, and Peter had more beers than we had drinks, so he owed four-twenty, but then there was the tip, and Marshall's friend was being *very* nice, and wasn't going to ask me for my share—I had two J and B's, and when they started that, I wished they'd been doubles—and Peter started off wanting sixty cents change, and Marshall's friend worked him down to fifty, he had a five-dollar bill, and then to forty. Now these guys knew the pedigree of every family between Charleston and Kansas City, the 'good families,' at least, and Peter's best girl's mother owned the horse that won the Kentucky Derby, and Peter's second-best girl's daddy owned a 'very nice place at Grosse Point,' and Peter's little brother, Chris, got an MGB for his sixteenth birthday and was up visiting his girl, Sally, in Chestnut Hill—'You must know Chestnut Hill, Carolyn,' Marshall's friend said, and then he started telling me about every Wasp family that ever had dinner at The Country Club, or played at Longwood—and they also knew who owned all the good houses between the ocean and the Rocky Mountains, between the end of the Civil War and the present. And they were negotiating the tip, which Marshall's friend said was never going over fifteen percent while he was living.

"I got so pissed off," Carolyn said. "I got so pissed off that when Marshall's friend got Peter down to twenty-five cents change, I grabbed the goddamned thing and said: 'Look, I'm a woman of the world. Gimme the fucking thing and I'll ride it on the fucking expense account. Now I'm goddamned starving. Let's get this goddamned show on the road.'



"It was a very strained evening," Carolyn said. "We met Tubby at Tony's and we had to wait a long time. In the bar. Marshall's friend talked about how, when he got married, he was going to invite all his old friends, whom he clearly wished us to believe he'd screwed, as, well, a series of acts of noble charity, so that he could see the 'scraggly types they married.' Peter thought that was mighty hilarious. Tubby said nothing. I got two dimes out of my wallet and gave them to Marshall's friend and said I'd spring for the whole project and throw in an extra dime in case the girl's mother answered the first time and she was out. 'I'm no virgin,' he said through his lockjaw. 'Yes, you are,' I said through my lockjaw, 'but you don't know it.'

"Then we had dinner," Carolyn said, "and Tubby and I talked about Women's Lib, which infuriated Marshall's friend and puzzled Peter and fairly well baffled Tubby, too, if you want the truth, but she didn't want to be baffled. And Marshall's friend and Peter talked about more families, and more houses, and money management, and then the check came and they sort of looked at it, and I took it and paid it, and we got up and started out, but I looked back, and there was Marshall's friend handing the tip I'd left to the waiter. I know why that bastard's in Finance. He's cheap.

"From there we went to a little place where they had two maybe-genuine Irishmen who sang about the rising of the moon." Carolyn said. "Marshall's friend asked them to sing 'Shenandoah' and they refused. Then he talked all the time while they were introducing their songs, and when they started 'Wild Colonial Boy,' he said: 'I don't see why they won't sing any *American* songs.'

"I saw the movie the next day," she said. " 'It traces the history of a composite American family,' read: those of the people he knows, 'from Sixteen-thirty-nine to the present." Right. I asked him what kind of camera he used—this was before I saw it, after which I didn't need to ask, and he said, well, I expected him to say 'Arriflex,' or at least 'Bolex.' and he said: 'Super Eight. But it has sound.'—and that whole damned film took forty-five minutes. I saw it and I went out to the airport and got on the plane and came home.

" 'Great guy, huh?' Marshall said," she said, "and I didn't say anything. 'Very creative,' Marshall said, and I didn't say anything then, either. But I wrote the story, all right, and I was very specific when I filed my expenses, and Marshall got just as pissed off as I'd been, twice: once for the story and once for the expenses of entertaining his measly friends, and since then, if the truth be told it's been less than blissful around my digs, on those nights when he chooses to appear."

"Three months ago?" Donnelly said. "Stroking my beard, I'd say you better, ah, terminate with extreme prejudice."

"Are you saying that," she said, "because that's what you think, or because you know I only go to bed with one guy at a time?"

"Because that's what I think," Donnelly said. "An hour ago, for the other reason. Now, for that one."

"Okay," she said, "I asked for that."

"You always do," Donnelly said. "You always did." □

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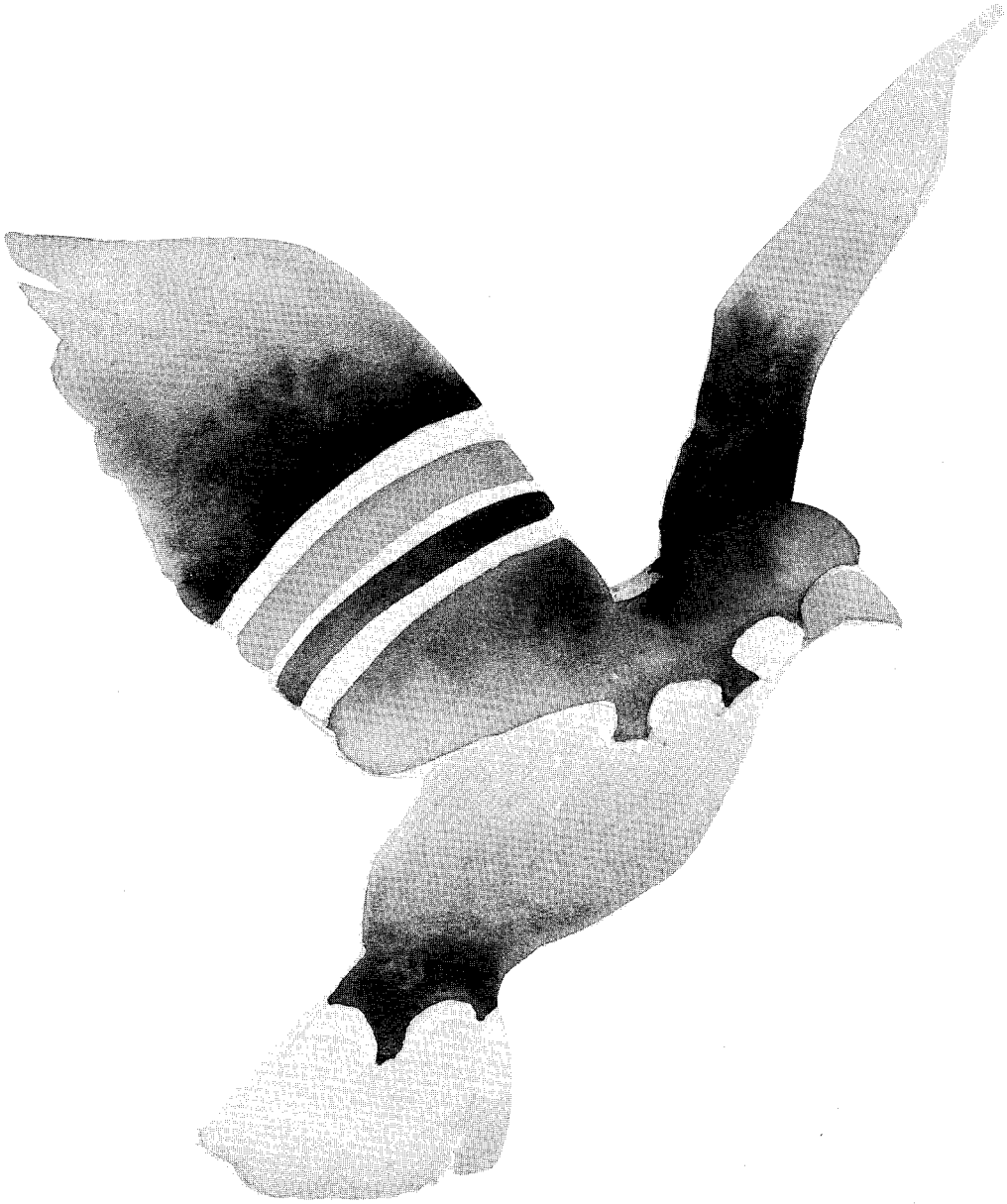

2. A PLACE OF COMFORT, LIGHT AND HOPE

Late in the afternoon, in northeastern Connecticut, the train went through the trailing edge of the storm. When it pulled into the station in Providence there were only a few flakes in the air. At the Massachusetts line there was only cold and accumulating darkness.

Lane and Donnelly sat in the lounge car on the blue tweed seats. They drank bourbon and water, and, deprived of the patterns of snow against the windows, without anxiety permitted long periods of silence. There were brooks full of dark water along the roadbed, and the snow covered the discarded tires and paper boxes and bottles on the banks. In the Attleboros (by then it was nearly dark) there were warehouses and factories with sharply peaked roofs against the darkening sky, and the outside floodlights shone on the grey, dry shingles and the dry, dull, red clapboards, and the snow that had drifted in around the buildings in the wind. At a grade crossing, a large black dog stood patiently in the flashing red light as the train went through. Behind the dog was a Buick with one headlight out.

"You want to know when the trouble starts?" Lane said. "I can tell you when the trouble starts."

"When you decide to go to work for a newspaper in the first place," Donnelly said.

"Nah," Lane said. "That's no different'n deciding to go to work for the railroad. You think the people that're supposed to keep this car up, so all the Amtrak advertising turns out to be true, you think they feel any different about the things they do?"

"I can tell they don't," Donnelly said, rubbing the fingers of his right hand through the grit on the window-sill.

"Well," Lane said. "what the hell can you expect? Neither one of us . . ., I bet, this train's almost full, and I bet there's not fifty people on it that'd be on it if LaGuardia wasn't socked in. Nobody takes the train except when he has to. You're in New York, and you've got to get to Boston, you fly. You can't fly, you've still got to be there, okay, down to Penn Station. And they all know it. They're running a goddamned fall-back, and they know it. I think working a

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second-class job can take a second-class man and make him third class. It gets to you. And that's when the trouble starts: the day you figure out, it all of a sudden dawns on you, that maybe you're working for a first-class operation, but what they've got you doing really isn't very important to anybody. It's just something that needs to be done, that nobody with any sense of self-importance'd want to do himself, so he's got you doing it, and that tells you what he thinks of you, boy. And then you think: well, I'm doing it, I've been doing it all along. So he must be right about me."

"And thinking that," Donnelly said, "thinking that. . . ."

". . . makes him right," Lane said. "Exactly. They ought to start you off honest, tell you right at the beginning: 'Actually, Mister Lane, we're not sure you've got the talent to write a column, or the brains to run a bureau, or the intelligence and drive to be a correspondent. And from your clips, well, you don't write very well, either. So if you think you're coming aboard to do some heavy fitting, forget it. You're too limited. But that doesn't mean we haven't got a place for you. There's a certain amount of donkey work in every operation, and this paper's no exception. Somebody's got to read copy, somebody's got to cover religion, somebody's got to watch high school track meets and rewrite the garden club news releases, because the people we put this thing out for. . . .' "

" 'The advertisers,' " Donnelly said.

"Right," Lane said, " 'the people who sell things, sell most of the things to the people who want to read more about the sports their kids're playing in high school'n they do about Sadat of Egypt or Kitchener of Khartoum. Roving correspondents and Washington bureau chiefs are for the people who put out the paper to brandish at people who put out other papers when they all get together at The Greenbrier to talk about the Role of a Free and Responsible Press in a Time of Crisis and elect each other to various things that they can publish in their own papers and show what great fellows they are. There's donkey work in this business because we're in the business of talking to donkeys, and we think, we're *convinced*, that you can bray with the best of them.' "

"Gawd," Donnelly said.

"Damned right," Lane said. "Awful. But a hell of a lot better'n bringing the kid in from the Athol *Daily News* and putting a lot of stars in his eyes, so that six years later, when he gets home from the three-to-eleven on the desk, his wife's looking at him the way a chicken farmer looks at a hen that's quit laying, so he doesn't go right home after a while: he waits until she's in bed. 'I thought you were going to be Walter fucking Lippman,' she says, only she never says it. She doesn't need to. Thinking it's enough. 'I'm a limited man, my dear,' you say, but you don't need to say it. 'I lacked his brains and his natural advantages to boot. I'm a singles hitter. They don't drive Cadillacs, maybe, but they can keep up the payments on a two-year-old Impala, and you do the best you can in this world.' Thinking it's more'n enough. 'You gave me to understand you were a home-run hitter,' she thinks. You did, too. That's the hell of it. And the worse hell of it is that it matters to her. It really does matter. It matters like a bastard. Oh boy, can a man have a drink or two on that discovery."

"You straightened it out, though," Donnelly said. "That's more'n I can say."

"I got through it," Lane said. "I didn't correct anything. I got through it. I survived it. I didn't get dismarried to Jean. I didn't get prostrate from the booze, although I came good and close. I didn't fuck out to the point where you couldn't carry me anymore, although I came pretty close."

"Close enough to suit me," Donnelly said. "Some time when you're buying flowers, get a bunch for Ernie Clark. There's a man who can hold back a question when the answer'd force him and the rest of them to do something they really don't want to do."

"I know it," Lane said. "Ernie's decent. He's a decent man. If he can throw you a rope, he will, and if he can't, if he just doesn't have a rope to throw, at least he won't drive the boat over you while you're thrashing around. I'll light a candle for him if he wants."

"Don't tell him, if you do," Donnelly said. "It'd embarrass him if he thought you really appreciated something he did. He wouldn't know how to act around you. You'd make him uncomfortable. Make him uncomfortable long enough, and sooner or later he'd do to you, healthy, what he prevented happening to you when you were in trouble, and he wouldn't even know why he was doing it. Just to get you out of his sight. Ernie's got a very low gratitude threshold. He doesn't want any, none at all. Scares the living bejesus out of him. Call Ernie a stubborn son of a bitch, and he'll reason with you and try to get you to see why he has to tell you to do what he's telling you to do, even though you don't like it. Tell him you think he's wrong, and he wants to hear all about it, and five times out of ten, he'll end up agreeing with you. Say 'Thank you' to Ernie and he starts shuffling papers on his desk and coughing and moving back and forth in his chair. You know what Ernie does? He goes to Mass and Communion, every day."

"I know it," Lane said. "I caught him coming out of Arch Street one day, when I was drinking while I was supposed to be interviewing somebody, well, I'd done the interview, actually, but I wasn't in any hurry to get back, and out he came. 'Son of a bitch,' I thought, 'lousy goddamned luck.' And then it dawned on me, he was more rattled than I was. I've seen guys, coming out of motels, didn't look as sheepish as he did, coming out of the Shrine. It's a funny business, when you get right down to it."

The train went through swamps where stunted oaks and maples, bare of leaves, stood dark in black water around the bases of their trunks, and snow piled up on small russet hummocks.

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"It's something fierce, when you get right down to it," Donnelly said. "When the trouble starts, that is. I don't know what the hell you do about it. I never have. That's the only progress I've made. Now I know I don't know, what the hell you do about it. I've been puzzled for years, and I just found out I was puzzled, and it's all I can do to keep from bragging about it."

"You feel like you're repeating Columbus," Lane said.

"Always," Donnelly said. "That's exactly what it is. You figure out something, and you feel like Lindbergh. Nobody ever figured this out before. 'The earth ain't flat, fellas. I got documentary proof. It's as round as a fuckin' bowling ball, no way you can sail off the edge.' And everybody stands around looking at you, as though you'd just taken leave of your senses. Which, of course, you did."

"I was different," Lane said.

"Sure," Donnelly said.

"I was," Lane said. "I was craftier. I didn't tell anybody, when I figured everything out."

"Which time?" Donnelly said.

"Every time," Lane said. "All of them. All hundred of them. I kept it to myself, that's what I did. I made a fool out of myself too many times, all by myself. I'm not looking for help, to do it again. I almost lost my job, I almost lost my wife, I was, the only reason I didn't go around babbling foolishness to people was that I was babbling foolishness to myself, and I was such a good listener, I didn't need anybody else. I'm a hell of a fellow, you know that?"

"I do," Donnelly said.

"Sure," Lane said. "What're you doing tonight, assuming we get there by tonight?"

"Seeing the kid," Donnelly said. "Me and Bob Cratchit. No holding us, around Christmas."

"Rough?" Lane said.

"Actually," Donnelly said, "no. Much better. What came before, with Gail, it was a lot worse. You were lucky."

"Yeah," Lane said.

"You were," Donnelly said. "I'm not minimizing anything. I don't do that. It's like this. I had a car at Logan. The planes aren't flying. Okay, I call ahead, and I take the train, and if everything works right, which it never does, I'll get into South Station and find a goddamned cab and get over to the Avis office and they'll have a car for me. With snow tires. And if something goes wrong, they won't, and I'll have to get another cab, and go over to the airport, and when I get there, they'll have my car, or else they won't, and I'll have wet feet, and when the whole thing's over, I'll either be where I'm supposed to be, to see my kid tomorrow, or else I won't be, but luck hasn't got anything to do with it, and now he's old enough to know that. For you, it did. You never got into anything deep enough so that luck wasn't any good anymore. I did."

"Wrong," Lane said. "It wasn't luck that did it. It was resignation."

"Yeah," Donnelly said,

"Yeah," Lane said, "it really was. You know what it was, that really got to me? She wouldn't lie. And she wouldn't keep her goddamned mouth shut, either. The result was, I knew everything she was doing.

"Now, I didn't *want* to know everything she was doing," Lane said.

" 'He that increaseth wisdom,' " Donnelly said, " 'increaseth sorrow.' "

"Damned right," Lane said. "I didn't want to know what she was doing. For Christ sake, I knew she was disappointed with me. That was bad enough. What she was doing about it, revenge or anything else, what the hell did I need that for?

"I got it," Lane said. "I didn't want to know, she knew I didn't want to know, she was damned and determined I was going to know, and so she told me. Bullshit. Without being asked. I actually discouraged it. Didn't do any good.

"You know something I'll never know?" Lane said. "I'll never know why they can't leave a man alone. I will just never know that. It was none of my business. I didn't want to mind it. I didn't even want to have it forced on me. Is that such a hard thing to do, to leave a man alone when he's minding his own business and not making any trouble for anybody? Why the hell should I have to make amends for knowing something, that she did, that I didn't want to know about in the first place? I never told her anything I did. Big fucking deal: she's getting laid, to get back at me. What'd I need that for? Why the hell did I have to hear about it?"

"For revenge," Donnelly said.

"Sure," Lane said, "and that's where luck drops out, as a factor. Then, when you've got something like that, the only thing you can do is choke it down."

"Did you?" Donnelly said.

"I must've," Lane said. "I'm still with her. I didn't beat her up yet. She didn't get me between the third and fourth ribs with the pinking shears. We must've."

"Well," Donnelly said, "it's better'n a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, I suppose."

"Hey," Lane said, "I'm just back from New York, I was interviewing somebody whose name I forget, and I'm gonna have one hell of a story for the features on it, and, hell, what if I never do see Lhasa, huh? It's a living. My dear wife picks me up at One-twenty-eight, and the sitter'll have a fire going when we get home, and I'll have a little Lancer's white and hear about how the septic tank overflowed again. Is that so bad?"

The train began to slow into the One-twenty-eight station. The platform was deserted. Beyond it, cars with parking lights on sat amber in the cold gloom.

"You tell me," Donnelly said.

"It's the best I can do," Lane said. "After all of this, we made some progress. We don't tell each other, anymore." □

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Tamara Kennelly

THE THIRD WHEEL

The buzzer squawks. He gives the wrong answer. The quiz master beams as the newlyweds argue. Only married two weeks, and already she's spitting. "Heading for splitsville," Timmy says rubbing his hands together. "We've seen some great moments, haven't we, Gina?" He loves to remember the highlights: Arlene Frances drunk, Jack Paar's departures, Lee Ann Merriwether—runner-up to Miss America—asleep at her desk on the *Today* show, Krushchev banging his shoe, Johnny Carson dropping his trousers, Pinky Lee's death interrupting his theme song.

In the old days, I'd laugh and clap with him and wave my feet in the air, but I'm too restless for the little people anymore. The sun lights up our dirty windows. Outside, children shout on the way back to school. Even if I sat on the park bench and watched them go in, I wouldn't feel free.

"I dreamt about the cemetery again last night," I tell him. "I was looking for my face in a polished gravestone."

The Go Crowd run hand-in-hand across the beach. Blonde girls toss their heads and show their bosoms and teeth. They gather around the cooler and pull out their bottles. Timmy raises his spoon to join in the toast. Pea soup dribbles down his grizzly chin. "The pretty package rules the world," he remarks as though he hadn't heard me.

"Bright flowers were piled on a new grave. I picked one up to bring to you, but in my hand . . ." He hisses me quiet. His favorite actor is shaving. Timmy doesn't want to miss the part where the mermaid slithers out of the foam.

I bite my lip and load dirty lunch dishes back on the tray. We used to lick our fingers and mark the air to score our hurts. The school buzzer silences the children. The patrol boys in orange belts will be dawdling back to their classrooms.

"Remember," I try again, "the time Lisa and her girl friend Betty gathered flowers from the cemetery and gave them away to strangers on the street, and we caught them with daisies in their hair squirting wine into each other's mouths from a plastic mustard bottle? You liked Betty, didn't you, with her silly giggle and her body already developed like a woman's and the dark rings of sweat under her arms?" Timmy is smiling.

"The flowers in my dream died in my hands. There was a hole in a big crypt, and I didn't want to look inside, but I had to see what was there. The cold hurt my teeth, and the darkness closed all around me and..."

"Will you please be quiet!" his bellow startles him as well as me. A smiling woman smoothes her hips. With x-ray vision we see through her dress to her girdle. "Why do you tear, Gina?" he pleads. His eyes never leave the TV.

He only kept it on for company in the days when he pulled me on his knee and read me endless poems about fairy lands with jewelled birds, knights wandering on quests and restless lovers in perpetual motion. "Excalibur! Excalibur!" He'd cry pointing to the window as though the magic hand with the gleaming sword had risen from the lake and flown all the way up the three stories to hang at our window. We used to hold hands and go out for treats.

"What are you giving up for Lent?" I ask. "Buttercreams?"

He pulls his chocolate smeared hands in under the blanket.

"CBS?" He looks as guilty as the parent of a battered child. "Don't you want a higher place in heaven?" I pick up the tray and leave him with the blanket pulled up around his chin.

I throw the laundry bags into my two-wheeled cart and put on my heavy sweater, black coat and babushka. The slam of the door isn't enough to make me feel good. I wish I could take our building and shake it hard.

TAMARA KENNELLY has had work in Epoch. *She has recently been a fellow of the Fine Arts Work Center, Provincetown.*

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Wasn't I the fool to call the repairman when the set went on the blink! Now that he's sure the man installed a special machine to register his responses he's chained himself to that TV. Even to eat, he won't leave it. Day and night he's out there under the pink blanket waiting for the next episode, the new contestant, the latest word from the sponsor so he can scribble his notes. As though they could be bothered to read all those papers he sticks behind the set. It was better when he hung around the back of church and lit candles, threw pennies over his shoulder at the saints and wedged his notes between their fingers and toes. At least he shaved and wore his nice blue suit on Sundays. He was happy then. Oh, he always hated to see babies pushed around like kings in their buggies, but he had his fun. He loved poking the collection basket under the faithful's noses, greeting the sneaky latecomers and helping the pretty young mothers walk the babies during the sermons while I sat alone in the pew. We woke up clean and pretty then. "Pray for me," Irish would call out when we passed his news stand on the way to Mass.

After his Saturday night parties with his precious little people, he can't drag himself out to church anymore. It makes me sick to see him out there with three days growth on his chin lying in crumbs and talking back to the little people as though they could hear him. And the endless trips to the bathroom and the refrigerator. The furniture's where it's always been for all these years, but of course he stumbles into it. His face will be loose in that silly smile. Oh he'd never think to pick up his socks, empty the ash trays, throw out the beer cans or even open a window to clear the stale air. He'd rather let everything pile up around him like he was the battle's only survivor. The worst is when his thin quavering voice breaks into the lonely darkness with a song. I bite my pillow to keep from screaming.

The sun blasts me with light. The chill wind lays damp on my spine. My shopping cart shrieks and breaks the snow crust. He used to be able to say, "She must be so crabby because she's getting her period." And then it was because of the pause. As though shedding a baby's home happened so regular it shouldn't matter. But what can he blame it on now? The blood's long gone with all its pretty shades from pink to chocolate; I'm left empty. I trudge through the alley on the way to the laundrymat, but I seem to drift backward, backward in time.

Lisa screamed, "Blood! Blood! I'm bleeding! I'm dying!" We ran to her. "Open up. Let us in!" We beat on the bathroom door. Then suddenly we knew what'd happened and blushed at what we'd ignored. Timmy faded back behind his newspaper; I went shyly in to my daughter. Why hadn't I warned her? Hadn't I seen the eyes of Timmy's cronies stray from the Notre Dame game to Lisa in hot pink lipstick, fuzzy sweater and bobby sox pulled up to meet her straight skirt? Didn't my heart know that they longed to hold the blooming peach to their cheeks for a touch of soft skin? On the way to the bathroom, Reds Kelleher patted my bottom as if he was patting the rump of a faithful horse. He forgot to call me a snaky-eyed broad.

Timmy punched the newspaper into shape when I asked him to run out for Lisa's supplies. He hurled his beer can across the kitchen deliberately missing the garbage, cursed Billy's pink plastic truck that lay in his way and went to sulk in the living room before the dead screen.

I didn't argue. I was glad to escape from them into the star-studded night. Was everything over for me? Our block was dark and quiet, but the pretty neon glowed on 53rd Street. Heels clicked to warm buildings and secrets. When the Sun Dial door swung open, big band music leapt out into the street. I thought of the fun of dressing for a dance. I wanted to be where people were laughing and having good times. I always felt so worldly when I brought party smoke home in my hair and clothes. I dared myself to go in alone.

The heads turned when I opened the door. The eyes measured my breasts, followed my hips to the stool. The hairy-armed bartender wiped his hands on the towel hung on his belt. I named the first drink I could think of. Somebody snorted and laughed. The men hunched over their drinks. A round-faced man in a shiny suit and monogrammed tie winked at me in the mirror. My hair was tousled, but the dim lights were kind. The liquor's warmth filled my chest; Frankie crooned on the juke box; my blood started. I looked down at my glass. I was glad that I was wearing the green sweater that set off my hair and eyes. The bartender said that the man wanted to buy me a drink. I said no and then yes and drank it fast. Like a pale balloon, his moon face floated behind me out of the bar. I felt him breathing close. He took my arm and blocked me with his body.

"Shall we take my car?" he murmured. I thought of letting him grease his hands in my thighs.

"My daughter is bleeding." I watched his whey face sour.

In the mirror behind the counter, my lips without lipstick were faded. The druggist smiled with the condescension of a man who knows when a woman's blood starts. Are their bodies without cycles?

At first I wanted to make it up with Timmy. I brushed my teeth as soon as I got in. But he didn't notice my too bright eyes or the booze flush. He didn't think of burying himself in me. When he believed my story about going all the way down to Walgreen's because Ozzie's was closed, I wanted to sneer.

He liked everyone in bed by the end of Jack Paar, but I stayed up to write to Modess for "How Shall I Tell My Daughter?" He couldn't sleep. He stood behind me in his shorts. "Don't be angry, Gina," he whispered stroking my hair. "It's a sad time for me too." I sucked his tongue that tasted like cigarettes.

Over the silver ribbons of car tracks, I pull my shopping cart. Lisa's girls are small willows now and that day of dying has been tied off in its casing of memory just like Timmy's cronies have dried up in their skins to die or sit by their own TVs. The alley smells are frozen over; snow hangs in brown clots under the cars. Once I strummed fences with a stick on the way home from school. I could walk half a block with my eyes shut and my face warmed by the sun's hands. I sprinkled glitter in my hair and wove the dark into dreams. Now if I close out this dazzling sun, I slip in and out of ruts. I have read about the seduction by snow drifts, about the winter traveler's longing for rest in the soft white banks, about the comfort of the final frostbitten sleep. If I lay in a brown pile of snow, would I find my place?

With her blue hair scalloped, sprayed and preserved under a pink bouffant net in the style she discovered suited her forty years ago, Agnes Pritchard watches me toil through the snow. A pink silk scarf is tucked in at the throat of her fitted, pearl

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gray coat. She wears neat stockings and polished shoes on her toothpick legs. I wish I'd remembered to comb my hair. "Agnes, how are you? It's been such a long time."

When I move towards her, her eyes—pale blue chicory flowers—dart around as though she was looking for someone. "Very well, thank you, Regina." She tries to go on, but I want to linger in her lavender smell. I remember those sweltering Sunday afternoons when we sat together at the park concerts and fanned ourselves with the programs. Our dresses stuck to our skins, our feet were swollen from the heat, the backs of our knees were sweaty. Once at intermission she spoke of a lost flame. The music brought him back to her. Afterwards it was as if nothing had ever been said. I want to talk about the real things. Has her nest of hairs grown thin? Does she too wear her petticoat to wander in her dreams? Has her sex gone silent? Is she lonely? With my eyes full of questions, I pull my cart towards her.

"Come on, Agnes. Let's go to Ozzie's for a coffee and Danish."

Her big pink eyelids blink in surprise. She edges away clutching her sack of glazed doughnuts, TV dinners, peppermints and Cadillac cat food to her breast as if I might try to take it from her. "I have to take my groceries home."

"Go ahead. I'll wait while you drop them off."

"Not today. I'm afraid I'm too busy today. I have to run now." Her fingers flutter; she won't meet my eyes.

I want to grab her chicken bone arm and make her stop. I think of her drawers full of ironed handkerchiefs, of her clean refrigerator and her narrow bed in the immaculate room decorated with plastic fruit, china shepherdesses, lace doilies and spoiled cats. I hate the order of her life. "For what? What's at home?"

She cringes, but she doesn't turn back. I want to run after her and yell dirty words. She skitters into her building.

When I'm all by myself in the alley, I'm ashamed. Her eyes were so blue. Only a virgin's eyes could be so cloudless. Fresh from the hairdresser's armpit. She still believes in the prince and the white horse.

After our first anniversary vacation—two days in the bowling alleys of Indianapolis—Timmy's brother Artie had the gall to announce he'd had a virgin in our apartment. All day long Timmy and Artie cackled together as though they'd just raised the flag on the moon. I had my laugh too when I checked the sheets and there wasn't a speck of blood. I told Timmy I wake a virgin every morning.

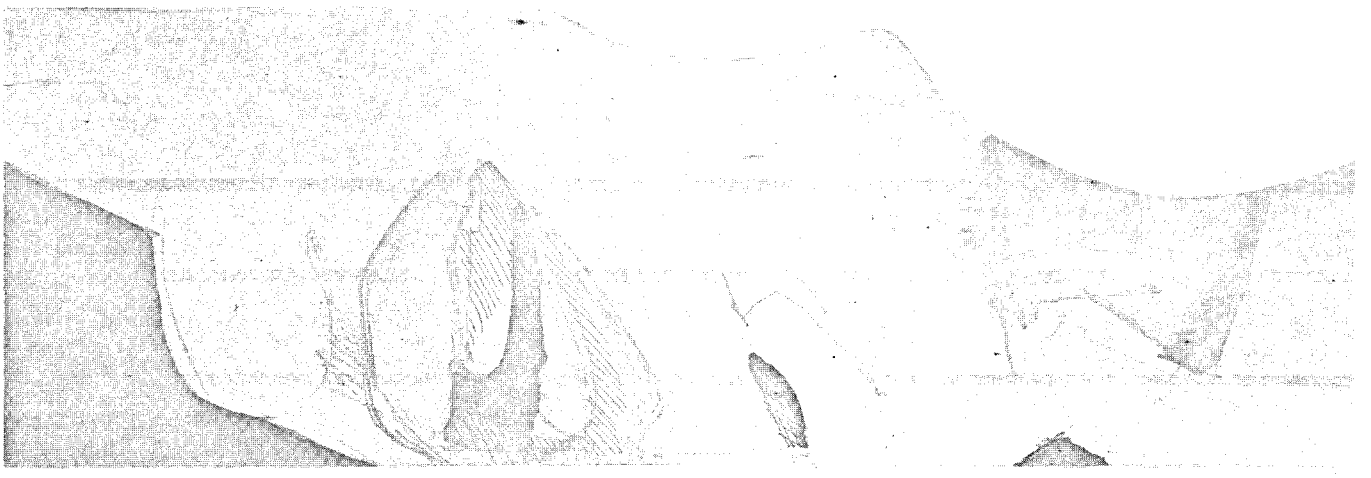
Come on, Gina. Don't let the slush of memory poison your heart. You don't want to stall and be left at home in the blue TV light. Oh my weary bones. Was Agnes too embarrassed to be seen in public with me looking such a fright with my buttons gone and my stockings laddered and syrup stains on my coat? I've let myself go. And no one to talk to. There I go working myself up. How my tears distressed my poor Billy even when they were only the tears of cold. He'd turn his pale face in the little red hat up to mine, and his mitten would hold tight to help me stop. Don't think of his sweet bow mouth or his expectant face pressed against the nursery school bars looking for me. Just do your duty and keep one foot going after the other as though they revolved around a small wheel.

My silly chin quivers. Here, take a deep breath. There's a girl. The rubber handle will steady me. Pull it up over the curb on to the sidewalk. All right, Miss, don't be so impatient. We'll all get there eventually. The cart screams for oil; people are staring. Timmy could fix it if he'd leave his little people for a moment. Not that he ever was the handy man. Wanted me to find the hole for him the first time. "Where's the satin slipper?" he kept whispering. I pretended not to hear.

Take a look at old Mr. Green staggering out of the Sun Dial at this hour. And there's Saul waiting to catch a lady squeezing his tomatoes. Come on. Pull the cart along past the Chinese laundry where the shirts come out spotless even though three generations live and raise caterpillars in the dingy back room. The old grandfather with the laughing gold teeth always loved to see how tall Billy'd grown. Here we go past Sandy the pirate's liquor store with the dog trained to attack Blacks and past the bicycle shop where the tatooed sailor with the coal black toupee spins the wheels in his hands and watches the women. Jack Kidder's at his usual post by the mail box outside Ozzie's waiting to consult with the postman about schedules and discuss his latest plot with anyone who'll listen. You'd think he'd be ashamed to put a woman's name on the nasty books he writes, but nothing stops him. Haven't I seen him slip into the market and weigh his manuscripts on the produce scales when Saul turned his back? Look at him now with that poor school girl he's cornered by the mailbox.

"I'd like to take you home and chain you to my bed post in your cotton panties," he tells the skinny-legged girl with her skirt so high you'd have to close your eyes if she bent over.

The girl shifts her books onto her other hip when I stop. She gives me a long hard look and pops her gum. "Dig it, lady," she says at last. "The dude's got an original rap."



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It's silly to feel the lump of hurt in my throat as big as if the librarian just yelled at me, but I'm grateful to get off the street into the nice soapy laundrymat smell. After I start the machines, I take my seat on the bench with the pamphlet called "The Seven Signs of Cancer in Men" in case there is something Timmy should know.

A grimey young man with a long dirty pink scarf and garlic breath comes in and sits down beside me. From his thick book he takes out a wad of toilet paper. He unwraps the toilet paper and munches the bacon he carried inside while he reads. The lady with the pink coat and the red rag tied around her head who's always here washing stares off into space from one side of the laundrymat; her big son stuffed like a sausage in his Levi's suit stares off from the other. On each of their foreheads is a cross of ashes as though we needed to be reminded that we're dying. A sticky girl with goo on her face and ashes on her forehead works up her runny-nosed brother until the two of them are spinning tops and their mother pretends she doesn't know them.

Sonny sweeps his broom over and over a patch of floor. Soap suds ooze from one of the machines and plop on the floor, the folding table needs a scrubbing and the rest of the laundrymat is filthy as the bottom of a cage, but Sonny sees only the spot before him. Every once in a while his large soft body jerks up awake, but soon he's rocking back and forth sweeping his spot. Such a hard worker. He just needs direction. It's a pity no one takes care of him. They say he lives with his sister, but look at his elbows popping out of his sweater and his pants too short to cover his shins and no socks in this weather. She could do better than that. At least he has this little attendant job inside where it's warm instead of having to hang around the market trying to help people with their groceries. Big as he is—must be over six feet tall—he doesn't look healthy with that round barrel stomach and those plump hips and breasts like a woman. You could push your finger in his doughy skin and leave a mark. It's a pity to see him in that big body with his peanut brain that never went to school and then deaf and dumb to boot. He must be almost thirty just like my poor Billy would've been.

When I take Sonny's arm to show him a new place to sweep, the broom clatters to the floor. His sweaty hand pumps mine; his childish smile shows off his rotten teeth. His stomach sticks out like a shelf to put things on. I point to his zipper so he can attend to himself. The sticky girl stops spinning to watch me take two Chunkys from my purse and give Sonny one. He eats it in a greedy bite. I fish two tissues from my sleeve and show him how to wet his with his tongue to dab his face and fingers clean. His tongue pokes through the tissue and waggles back and forth. I pull the pink shreds from his mouth. "Mumcheck," he says his only word. His laugh rattles hoarse as a stalled engine.

The Levi's sausage son rises like a sleepwalker and crosses the laundry to help his mother fold sheets. I sit down again. My heavy coat makes me sweat, but I'm too ashamed of my old dress and slack body to take it off. I hate the mirror's surprises. How could I be so old? If I pressed my face to the window, would any young man light me with his smile?

Under the rush of hot water, I lathered my body with perfumed soap. My skin flushed pink and soft; my hair curled in ringlets. In the foggy bathroom mirror, I could make out my trim waist, my full breasts. I'd forgotten my robe, and I dashed out into the hall on the way to my room before I knew they were sitting at the dining room table. "Oh mother!" she cried, and the mild brown eyes of the teen-age boy who never took off his leather jacket slid over my body. For a moment, I was poised like a musicbox dancer. I knew he'd be glad to turn my body in his hands.

I lay in the dark listening to Lisa's semi-hysterical laughter. Would he laugh too? Was he repulsed by the Caesarian scar Billy left on my belly? The boy was silent. I pushed the pillow between my legs. Was he a virgin?

I wrench the wet twists out, throw the clothes in the dryer and take my place on the bench. Pull the clothes out and push them back in. I live a rented life that's never really mine. Pulling Timmy to Mass when he tired of the saints; dragging him home from the tavern; rousting him out of the bed and off to work in the morning in the good old days when he went to work and left me some peace; pulling Billy in the red wagon to the dentist; holding him down for his shots; pushing Lisa back out the door when she came back five minutes after she'd left for school and said she saw a snake. Keeping things moving. Picking up socks. Scraping the plates. Paying the bills. Dragging my cart back and forth through the alley. Bumping up and down the stairs. Back way, of course. Make all deliveries in rear. Make a racket to let the landlady know I'm doing right by her.

Go ahead, you sticky girl, run your hand right over my lap like I was nothing but a lump on the bench. My back aches; my heart is colder than stone.

I see my reflection in the window, and then I see something more. A frail old lady in a black feathered hat and white gym shoes steps out from between two parked cars into the path of a bus barrelling down the street. Is she smiling? Has her fork stuck at last in a bold moment of truth? If she knelt in her own blood, could she feel? A young man in a fatigue jacket leaps out, sweeps her up in his arms and sets her aside. Wheels screech; the bus stops in time. Her hat hangs over her left eye; her white hair sticks out in wild tufts. People linger on the scene wishing for more. We secretly chant, "Jump! Jump!" from ten stories below. The olive-skinned young man hovers over her and cautiously dusts her coat. As girls dreaming of rescue, we watched the lifeguards. He offers her his arm, but she looks in amazement at his Afro and pushes him aside to go back the way she came quivering like a bobblehead doll.

My stomach is queasy. It must be the chocolate. I stand too fast and the colored dots run brown before my eyes. The zippers burn in the hot clothes that I pull from the dryer to the folding table. My fingers are trembling. I'm too worn out to bother folding things right. I wad up the tired gray sheet like a used napkin.

"Mumcheck!" Sonny jerks the sheet from my arms. "Mumcheck! Mumcheck!" His eyes roll white as he tosses me the other end. He stands stiffly at attention and then cracks the sheet smartly before he helps me fold it. We work faster on the next one even though he insists—just like a man—on the ritual of standing stiff for each beginning. Faster and faster we fold sheets, pillow cases, towels and T-shirts; we match socks and make balls. Sonny claps his hands happily over the neat stacks before he loads them into the cart. Taking a crooked path

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through the people stuffing machines with dirty clothes, he wheels the cart out of the door before I can stop him. I look back to see what the others are saying, but only the sticky girl who smears the window with her nasty tongue watches us go.

"Wait for me," I call forgetting he's deaf. Instead of pulling the cart properly, he pushes it in front of him. The push builds up momentum, and the screaming cart swings back and forth across the sidewalk in tipsy swerves. He's almost at Ozzie's. I try to catch up, but I can't push my legs fast enough. "Wait up, Sonny!" The swerves widen. People jump out of the way as he swoops back and forth across the sidewalk splattering snow mush.

He turns sharp at the corner, and Timmy's shorts spring out onto the sidewalk. My hand holds the ache in my side. I lean against the drugstore window to calm my heart.

Socks fly from the cart as he plows through pigeons into a tree. Underpants hang from bare branches; brassieres sprawl in the snow. But something shines a beautiful emerald green under the tree. That's what draws me. I kick the shorts aside. My feet are ready to follow a tinker's shuffle.

No carts then. No need for carts that shiny day he chased me through the park and we were laughing breathless. We had only a brown paper sack with a loaf of bread. I let him catch me and I melted for a moment, but then I broke free and ran off again halfway around the fountain. Wasn't I the fox then? I kicked off my heels and pulled up my dress to unsnap the garters. I wanted to be at the fountain's center where the jets gushed over the embracing stone lovers. Mist beaded my lashes; my skirt trailed heavy in the water. My hands cupped the wet bosom of my dress that clung tight as the skin of a Ribier grape. I wanted to touch the stone lover, to rest my cheek on his cool thigh.

Timmy waited awkwardly on the edge wanting me but wishing I'd come out of there. He backed off to the park bench, and I was ready to turn from him forever when he took off his shoes and socks and rolled up his trouser legs to the too white skin he never exposed to the sun. He looked a bit silly with his thick yellow toenails and his baggy rolled-up trousers, and for an awful breath I wondered if I really wanted him. He draped my stockings around his neck and stepped into the fountain after me. When his kisses rained on my lips and neck and shoulders, he made me glad. In the last hot stripes of the golden sun, we waded hand in hand around the stone lovers. "My rose," he said, "my summer day." Careful as a bridegroom, he carried me to the bench. I was shivering in the blue dress that clung purple with wetness to my thighs. He put his seersucker jacket around my shoulders and reached to give me his handkerchief to dry myself with, but his pocket was empty. Then he laughed—a sweet sure laugh in the dusk—and ripped open the paper sack. With a soft hunk of fresh bread, he rubbed my feet dry. I took his long white foot in my lap and wiped it in bread.

Over and over Sonny backs up and charges until he misses the tree, runs back onto the sidewalk and rushes on leaving a trail of towels, wash rags and underwear. Under the tree, the green glints lovely in the sun. We called these vacant lots prairies in the days when we surprised snakes in the grass, tasted milk weed and crushed leaves in our hands for the stain and the smell. My lovely green under Sonny's tree is only a 7-Up can pierced by two triangular holes in spite of the pop top. Cracked and bleeding from the cold, my chapped hands curl into a claw around beauty. I throw the can away.

TV aerials flash bright fingers over the brick apartments as the sun falls down all over the city. If I could stand in my body in dignity, my spirit might try for another life.

On the first flight of the back stairs, I unbutton my coat. The backyard gate slams. "Mumcheck! Mumcheck!" A pink slip hangs around his neck. He waves excitedly, picks the cart up in both arms and comes up the stairs after me. I shed my coat on the second flight. On the third, I unbutton the moth-eaten sweater and faded wash dress. There is a sadness in parting with these clothes that have held me so long. His sweaty face shines as he pants close behind me. When we reach the top, I try to give him something from my purse, but he shakes his head and waits expectantly before the door with the cart in his arms. I open the back door and signal to him to sit at the kitchen table while I check on Timmy. I lean on the refrigerator to kick my shoes off. In the long dark hallway, I shrug off my dress.

The TV's on without sound. He snores before it with his hands folded on top of the blanket ready for the lily in what he likes to call his meditation posture. He never admits to sleeping. The little people kiss the quiz master, scream their greed and jump for joy at prizes. I unhook my stockings and let them fall on the socks he takes off to let his feet breath. I toss away the rubber bands on my wrists.

Tucked in the corner of the screen is a note:

> To the sponsors:
> Icarus fell because he believed in fire. You asked for it.
>
> Your fellow American

The paper flutters to the worn carpet. A dirty crown Lisa wove years ago out of Palm Sunday palms hangs on the print of the Old King. How can I pray? I pull off my underpants and the worn girdle that bulges in my shape and holds some warmth and smell even without me. The flesh is glad for the chance to jiggle and sway. My bra cut red welts; my girdle left a zigzag design. Flesh hangs under my arms, fattens my purple-veined thighs and ripples between sagging breast and belly, yet I am fond of this body.

People in the studio audience unfurl illegible banners.

Once again as I walk the hallway in my petticoat, my mind swings in the noose. I think of putting the pistol in my mouth, of papering the garage windows for the privacy of carbon monoxide, of daring to blaze with the red bloom of blood. The kitchen is empty, but I know he's still somewhere inside.

Plump and proud, he makes our bed with clean sheets. I lead him back to the kitchen and sit him before a plateful of cookies. I put milk on the stove for cocoa and join him at the table. My mind drifts to the wild strawberries of the bodies of young men at the beach—splashing through frothy waves, laughing and flirting, showing off with push-ups, posing their muscles with stomachs sucked in, combing their hair.

Sonny pulls his chair close to mine. Under the long curly lashes his eyes are bright as birds. He puts his foot in my lap, and I tie his shoe. □

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Denis Johnson

TATTOOS AND MUSIC

The four motels of Jamie's experience had all been flat. They hadn't been grand and tall like the Hotel Magellan. They hadn't stood up to declare themselves for six storeys amid congested Pittsburgh, they'd only reclined by their swimming pools taking the dust of the cars going by and Jamie didn't care if the Hotel Magellan was a rotten hotel. It was a hotel, no denying. It was her first hotel, and she'd been gone from her husband only sixteen days. She thought it would be nice if they had a car to go with it.

"A car," Leather Bill said. He was standing before the bathroom door with a towel around his waist and a gigantic, completely naked black-haired woman all over his back whom he'd acquired in Singapore, in the Navy. He had Navy tattoos and prison tattoos, and it was easy to tell which were which, because the Navy ones were many-colored and dazzling and the prison ones were faded to indistinct black smudges, like car-grease. His mouth was open and his head thrust forward in a manner implying she should not talk any more about buying a car.

"Sure, why not a car?" Jamie said. She imagined pleasurable drives through the suburbs with Miranda Sue and Baby Ellen behaving nicely in the back seat and the breezes of the new spring, not yet arrived, coming in through the windows of the new car. "Save us all them taxis," she said. "All them buses." Miranda was dragging Baby Ellen all around the room exclaiming, "Lookit! Baby Ellen can finally walk."

"Well, what kind of a car?" Leather Bill said. "You mean like maybe a Chevy, or what?"

"Chevy'd be nice. That'd be just fine, Chevy or a Ford. Or whatever you want, Bill honey." It was his money.

He removed the towel from around his waist and began drying his hair. "Yeah? Well guess what," he said and she asked him what, but he wouldn't tell her. He sat on the bed, where Baby Ellen crawled to him and stood supporting herself by his knee, her erect figure wavering in small jerks, her eyes astonished, her mouth pursed to a tiny point. Leather Bill stared at her blankly. The TV in a neighboring room blared momentarily at top volume, then settled to a low murmur. A collection of saliva bubbles escaped from Baby Ellen's pursed lips. "She always looks like she's finally got something important," Leather Bill said. "But then all she does is spit all over herself." He stood and surveyed the room absently. "I got about two hunnerd left, that's what," he said.

"Oh," Jamie said. "That ain't a whole lot."

Leather Bill began to search the dresser for clothing. "Now, two hunnerd bucks, that'll get you maybe *part* of a semi-decent car. Or you can go to some smiley bastard on TV and get you a car that just don't run for shit." He pulled the bottom drawer out entirely and let it crash to the floor.

"Oh." She sat on the bed, sorry to have brought it up.

"Or," he said, "you could get you some food with it. That's in case you're the type person who gets hungry ever now and then. You ever get hungry?"

"I'm hungry now!" Miranda said.

"You shut up. I'm not talking to you now. You just had your lunch a half hour ago."

"Hush up now, hon," Jamie told Miranda. She caught hold of the child with the vague intention of embracing her,

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DENIS JOHNSON was born in Munich, studied at Iowa, lives now in Washington state; he's also a fine poet.

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or braiding her hair. "Well. What all you going to do today?" she asked Leather Bill gaily.

"Don't go changing the subject on me," he said. "I had twelve hunnerd. I got two hunnerd left. What I want to find out, where the fuck did it all go." He pulled in his stomach and cinched his belt.

She let go of Miranda. "Don't know. Guess we must of spent it."

"Damn straight we spent it. *You* spent it."

"Now, you spent it too."

"On you!"

"And on your own self!"

"At the places *you* wanted!"

"Uh huh! Oh yeah! So now all of a sudden it was just me!"

"Most of the time," he said.

"It was you! You threw more money than I could count at that blackjack man in the Twin Peaks Club. You pretended like money was no object."

"Yeah? Yeah?"

"Going around to all them places where you got to pay cover. I told you millions of times, let's us just go in this one, or that one, one of them over there, where you don't need to pay money just to get inside the door—"

"*When* did you say that? If you'd of said that I would of done it. You just name me one time when you said that."

"Going to all the fancy places. That's your idea, not mine. And getting drunk and getting on all the wrong buses and then we have to pay the baby sitter extra ever time."

"Just when did you say it, that's what I'm saying."

"Made me feel like a nigger when the man wouldn't let us on the bus that time."

"Just trying to duck the main thing." He was shouting. "You never *once* said let's go where it's cheaper."

"I just know I said it, that's all. Lots of times."

He threw his comb onto the bed, shaking his head and emitting a laugh painfully, with hatred. "Sheeeee!" he said.

"Well I did too and you know it!"

"She did too!" Miranda said, standing before him hands on hips, chin out, and he slapped her backhanded. Miranda loosed a rising, breaking howl that strained toward the top of the scale and passed out of the range of hearing, and then for some seconds it seemed she wouldn't be able to catch her breath. Leather Bill stood clutching his undershirt and Jamie stood still by the window until the child raspingly sucked air and released another wail.

Jamie moved to take her in her arms. "I told you you can't hit her! She ain't your kid!" She squatted, arms around Miranda, taking as much protection as she gave. Miranda sobbed half-heartedly.

"Oh, now, I didn't hit her hardly a-tall," Leather Bill said. His hand jerked weakly as if to toss his undershirt on the bed. Miranda broke free of her mother's arms and went to join Baby Ellen in an exploration of the bathroom.

"Now, honey, Jamie," he moved to her, pulled her to him, she jerked away, "honey, now, I didn't mean to, you know I didn't mean to," he pulled, she jerked, he enclosed her in his thick arms, she turned away from him in his arms, "now you know sometimes I just go up in smoke practically, there, now, just sit down now," she jerked away again and danced back a step and he did not pursue her. She went to the window and gazed out at a strip of bathroom tissue snagged on the bars of the fire escape. He stood with the look of one misplaced, gesturing apologetically with his undershirt.

They moved along the sidewalk under the streetlamps, among the headlights, and Jamie shouted suddenly over the traffic noise, "Well I don't care if it *is* far. Let's us just go to Philadelphia. I never been there either. I never been any goddamn place."

"Now in my estimation," Leather Bill said, "there just ain't nothing in Philadelphia."

"Liberty Bell's something, ain't it? You going to tell me it's just nothing, just because it's in Philadelphia and you say there ain't nothing there?"

"The Liberty Bell ain't nothing to *see*. Ain't even nothing to talk about. Talk about something else."

"It ain't so far to Philly," she said. "It's the Bicentennial."

He began to draw ahead of her, talking to the sidewalk, a stranger to this woman a bit behind and to the left of him. "Declaration of Independence, that's probly worth a look, all them signatures and all. Constitution's probly okay I guess. But they ain't neither of them in Pittsburgh *or* Philly. Only thing in this state's the Liberty Bell, and that's just a damn bell anyway."

"Well it ain't far," Jamie pleaded. "I just wish we could go see it. It really ain't that far. It's patriotic."

"Well I was already patriotic for six years in the Navy," he said, grabbing a fistful of his purple cowboy shirt. "Anyway *I* think it's too damn far. It's just crazy."

She saw she was making a bad evening for him, but couldn't hold herself from coaxing him as they continued down the block. He told her the Liberty Bell might be anywhere right now, maybe touring the country. He insisted they often took the Liberty Bell all around, parking it in schoolyards. Then he began telling her, "I just ain't going to Philly. You can't get me to go there *no* way. Forget it!" and she decided to talk about the Easter decorations already displayed in the storefronts. "I don't give a shit about baskets or rabbits," he said. "It costs too much to go to Philly now. We don't have enough time," and she thought that meant they'd be finished when the money was finished, and they'd been together only eleven days. She was sorry to have made such a bad evening.

They walked in silence for a time and then she asked casually, "Say, how much you got left these days?" but breathlessly, too, winded from keeping up.

"I think there's a place with a good country band up here a ways," he said. "Ga-damn, I'd like to see Waylon Jennings. I saw Johnny Cash when I was in the joint, but I never have seen Waylon."

"Well, maybe we hadn't ought to go there tonight," she said. "Maybe we ought to save that band for another night, huh? What do you think about it?"

"What? Think about what?"

"Think we ought to save Waylon for another night, Bill?"

"I never said Waylon was playing at this place. You think Waylon Jennings is going to play at one of these piss factories? Use your brain."

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"But what I mean to say is, you don't have a whole lot left, do you? Didn't you pay the hotel tonight? I thought you paid—"

"Yeah, I did. You got to pay them or you can't stay there, you know."

"Oh. For a day's worth?"

"The most important thing you can do," he said, "is be quiet."

"Oh. Uh-oh." She looked away from his bobbing shoulder. She looked at the street. She regretted making such a bad evening.

"I guess I got about a hunnerd and ten left, something like that," Leather Bill said.

"Oh," she said, hurrying to catch up to him and look into his face. "Well, maybe we better just go home," she said. "If that's what you feel like, it's okay because we don't have to go out ever single night."

"No. Let's just step inside of here a minute, and then we'll take the bus to this one other place I was telling you about." And abruptly he was in fine spirits. "Oh come on! What you think? You can't have you a good time on a hunnerd and ten bones? Well you just step in through here with me, little Miss, and we'll see about it."

They stopped in at several other bars where Leather Bill drank large and Jamie watched, as if scrutinizing a mystery, rarely joining him. She was falling apart, she felt, with weariness, but Leather Bill seemed oblivious to the whole idea of the Hotel Magellan. "Right here. This is what we been after all along," he said, gesturing at the Tally Ho Budweiser King of Beers. In the window beneath this sign, neon blinked BUD BUD BUD. "We're here to stay."

"Now hey, this ain't the one you were telling about." She hung back. "This one doesn't even have a band playing or nothin. All they got is Budweiser beer, looks like. Probly don't even have a bar."

"This is a fine place," he said. "We'll go in this fine place right here."

"You don't even know this place," she told him.

"This is a fine place," he said.

"I don't think you ever been here before."

"Listen here," he said. "I grew up here practically. This is practically my home. It was a fine home." With a hand he urged her through the door.

Immediately Jamie disliked its insides. There were unescorted women at the bar itself, drinking glumly with their chins sticking out. There were many sounds—low voices, chairs moved, glasses set down, a voice rising with passion and then subsiding—but in her frayed weariness Jamie felt these were a continual breaking of the silence that was the main thing, and she was tempted to whisper as in the public library. "We ought to go back and see what's happening on the television," she said not loudly, and Leather Bill gave her a glance. "I'm awful tarred right now," she told him. They took a table toward the front. In the back a man pounded on his table, spilling a drink, and the woman with him suddenly got up and left, her earrings jiggling as she marched away stiffly. Around them at tables men drank alone, staring out of their faces. They'd been here twenty seconds, and already nothing was happening. This was a place, as far as she could tell, where people came to wait for the next moment, having lost hold of the last. No one came to their table to take their order. A man came over and tried to take Jamie away from Leather Bill. He pointed to the girl he was with over at the bar and offered to trade.

"I knew this would happen," Jamie said.

"I come here pretty near every weekend and I get the same one every time," the man explained, pointing again to the girl at the bar. The girl was scratching her throat with a pinky while looking in the mirror. Leather Bill listened politely.

"Oh, she's all right," the man said quickly. "Nothing wrong with her. Just I've had her before is all, about six times and she tells the same old jokes. But they'd be new to you. What do you say?" He turned to Jamie. "What do you say? You don't mind."

"I most certainly—Bill! Will you tell him what's what?" She pulled Kleenex from her purse and began wiping at her make-up. She shifted in her chair and yanked at the hem of her skirt.

The man smiled. "She seems stuck on you," he told Leather Bill. "But she won't mind. You won't mind, will you? She won't mind. What do you say, old buddy?"

"Well, now, I don't exactly know," Leather Bill said. "All depends. How much you say you're paying that lady?"

"Oh, there's no—it's very unofficial," the man said. "We haven't really gotten around to that yet. It all depends."

"Hey—I don't know if this is a joke or what," Jamie said excitedly. "You stop it. Listen, I don't need this. What you doing?" The man seemed to sense complications. His smile turned wary.

"You think this one is worth twenty?" Bill asked the man.

"Bill!" Jamie caught hold of Leather Bill's arm and clawed it frantically, remaining stiff and erect in her seat.

The man began looking Jamie over. Leather Bill smiled uneasily off toward the shadows and their small noises.

"Oh, yes, definitely, twenty dollars," the man said.

She didn't want to draw stares by rising from her place. She covered her face with her hands. "*Bill*," she said again, into her hands.

"Well now, you were the one who was crying about money just a while ago." There was a hardness to his voice. Then he laughed with embarrassment.

Jamie found herself, behind her hands, considering the amount of twenty dollars. "Stop, stop, please?" she said into her hands.

The man stood uncomfortably beside the table and put his hands in his pockets. He squinted at Jamie's hands as if to see what might be behind them.

"Okay," Leather Bill said. "Guess that's that. Just a misunderstanding. Nobody's fault. Right?" he said to the man.

"Oh, gee, a misunderstanding?" the man said. He looked oddly at Leather Bill. "Oh, listen, say I guess I—this your . . .? Boy, I'm sure sorry." He turned very red in the dim light and left the table. He took the girl at the bar by the arm and went out with her, lifting his hand weakly to Jamie while staring angrily at Leather Bill. The girl went where she was pushed, trying repeatedly, and failing, to get her purse-strap hooked over her shoulder. Jamie and Leather Bill said nothing. The bartender came over to their table with two seven-and-sevens, compliments of the mis-

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taken gentleman. Jamie wanted to leave right away. Leather Bill downed both drinks and they went out.

They said nothing for a time on the street. Jamie halted at a bus stop on the side of the street pointing home. Leather Bill walked on in apparent ignorance of her stopping, then turned and went back to stand with her, as though puzzled that she was no longer in a partying mood. After a time Leather Bill breathed deeply of the night and then exhaled, saying "Aaaaaaaah!" and then he stretched and yawned and said, "Hey there!" and "Well now!" and other such things.

The bus had passed into the outskirts of the city and they'd missed their stop. Jamie settled her head against the back of the seat and read all the advertisements above the windows. Nope, not me, forget it, she said silently to each poster in turn. Outside as the houses passed, their roofs rose and fell, and she imagined a gigantic blade protruding for miles from her window, levelling the whole suburbs six feet above the ground. Beside her, Leather Bill stared forward through glazed eyes.

They were alone on the bus with the driver. He was a compact young man with a boot-camp style crew cut under an official bus driver's hat supported solely by his ears. When he looked up, the hat tipped backward to expose his forehead, and when he looked down, the hat tipped forward to obscure his view of the street, forcing him to flip his head back again to raise the brim. Neither positioning of the hat seemed to satisfy him. Watching, Jamie felt an onslaught of affection for him, such as she felt for battery-run, mechanical toy rabbits who nodded stiffly, winked, raised the left paw while lowering the right and opened and closed their mouths, overjoyed at their ability to run through these simple motions. He had the air of a little boy who had stolen some poor bus driver's hat and his bus, too, and now cruised the streets maintaining a precarious lucky control over the huge machine and hoping some of his classmates would come along to see to what heights he had risen. Jamie thought of her own children, Miranda and Baby Ellen, all of a sudden fatherless, sitting out in the middle of the storms of the world but going on anyway with their small lives. She didn't know what would happen to them. She hated them both most of the time now.

The bus came on a shopping center, wind-swept and desolate at this hour, and turned into its parking lot and stopped. The young driver yanked on his hand-brake and turned to sit sideways in his seat.

"Look," the driver said. "You guys got some idea about where you want to go tonight?" He pushed his hat back.

Leather Bill raised his head, brought his two eyes together so they were looking at the same place at the same time, at the driver. "What say?"

"I says: this is the end of the line right here. I just took you every place this bus goes, but there you are, still sitting there. Now I'm supposed to turn around and go back everywhere I just took you. See," he leaned forward with a serious expression, "this bus only goes certain places. Each bus only goes—"

Leather Bill came to life and blundered over to stand by the driver's seat. He examined the driver's face. "Hey. Listen to this here proposition I got for you," he said.

"No," the driver said. "Nope; no propositions. I just can't listen to any propositions." He glanced around, and touched the buttons of his grey shirt. "See, there's certain rules if you're a bus driver."

"Course there's certain rules! Has to be rules to make everything work out right, right?"

The driver rubbed his chin, unwilling to agree too hastily.

"Certainly!" Leather Bill said. "I learned all about rules in the Navy. When it comes to the rules, you just listen to me."

"I'm not listening," said the driver. "You can't get me to listen."

"There has to be rules to make things run right. *But*—if you got an idea about *break*ing the rules, to make things run *better*, why goddamn it then a course there ain't a reason in the world not to break the rules."

"I don't know about that," the driver said.

"Now, here it is: I'm going to pay you extra to go where we want to get to, that's all. I'll pay you all the extra you want."

"Nope." The driver shook his head. His hat stayed in one place while his head went from side to side underneath it.

"Wait! Wait up one second," Leather Bill said. "I ain't even said where we're going yet. This is something. Going to make you a lot of extra. You want to listen?"

"No Sir. Don't want to listen." The driver removed his hat and put both hands over his ears.

Leather Bill fished several dollars from his wallet and held them before the driver's face. The driver shook his head.

"Okay, I'll name the figure," Leather Bill said. The figure was thrown from his mouth, from the depths of his body: "Fifty bones."

The driver took his hands off his ears and drew a small printed sheet from the shelf below his steering wheel. "I got my specific route right here," he said. He snapped the paper several times with his finger. "This is it. If I don't see it on here, then it just isn't it, that's all."

Leather Bill brought all the money from his wallet and held it out to the driver, like an irrelevant bouquet held out to the jilted bride. "Tell you where we want to get to," he said. "We aim to see the Liberty Bell. In Philly."

The driver's eyes grew wide. "Sure. One o'clock in the morning."

"Right here," Leather Bill thumbed the money, "right here is, here is, here is—ninety-six dollars! Ninety-six big old big ones, boy. Now how much you make tonight all night, driving down your specific route there? Don't seem exactly like the big time next to ninety-six dollars, does it?"

The driver shook his head slowly. He started to speak, and then exhaled wordlessly instead. He looked over his printed sheet carefully, as if hoping to find Philadelphia had become part of his route. "I just have this specific route right here," he said at last. "I got to stick right with it. I got my timetable. No stopping for coffee. No stopping for donuts. No smoking. And I should always be patient with my passengers. And absolutely no drinking."

Leather Bill snapped his sheaf of money as the driver had snapped his specific route. "Ninety-six dollars."

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"*I* know how much it is. It's just I'd be out of a job. I'd lose this job for sure."

"You won't need no job, with ninety-six dollars."

"That won't last forever."

"You can have you a *time* with ninety-six dollars."

"Philadelphia!" the driver said.

"You got it! You're getting it! The Liberty Bell! Which my poor wife sitting there right over there has always wanted to see, poor woman, and she never has seen it yet, poor little old gal. Ninety-six dollars!"

"Now hold up a minute," Jamie said from her seat, and Leather Bill waved her off. She said nothing else, waiting to see which way this business was headed.

"I just can't *go* anywhere I want to with a crazy man to Philly," the driver said. "Philadelphia!" He replaced his hat on his head, drew himself around facing front and released his hand-brake. "Standing up in front of the white line," he said in a neutral tone, pointing to the white line by his seat. "Delaying the bus driver. Attempted bribery."

"What?" Leather Bill said. "What is this? Ninety-six dollars, and you're handing me the goddamn rules. I told you about the rules. Don't you know when the world is trying to do you a kindness?"

"Talking to the driver. Trying to get the driver to go off the specific route," the driver said.

"Ninety-six dollars," Leather Bill said.

The driver started up his bus. "I have to be home same time everyday, two-thirty A.M. See, I'm married," he said confidentially.

"*She* won't be *mad*," Leather Bill said. "You just show her this here ninety-six dollars and she'll say, you're my man!"

The driver looked up. "That's a thought. That's a good argument. That's a hell of a thought." But with a pained expression he put his bus in gear. "No. I just can't do it. Can't do it. Won't do it. I got this job after six months of nothing. I *got* to keep it. You just don't know."

"Now you turn this bus off," Leather Bill said, "and let's talk."

"Just please wait one minute," Jamie put in. It was all headed the wrong way, in her view. "Hold up there," she said good-naturedly. No one was listening. Leather Bill had taken a pint bottle of Gordon's gin from his pants pocket and was waving it around in the area of his mouth.

The driver was turning his bus around in the parking lot. "Consuming alcoholic beverage on the bus! Standing in front of the white line talking to the driver with ninety-six dollars attempted bribery!"

"Goddamn *I'll* show you ninety-six dollars bribing." Leather Bill moved his face and his fistful of money before the driver's face. The driver continued maneuvering the bus in a tight circle, leaning over to see past Leather Bill's head and hand. "I don't want this money, see?" Leather Bill said. "I just don't give a shit about this here money. You give a shit about this money?"

"*I* do!" Jamie said. "Bill! Sit down!"

"You better leave me alone, right now," the driver said sternly. "You're disturbing the other passengers on my bus."

"Okay," Leather Bill said. "*You* don't give a shit about this money. *I* don't give a shit about this money. Okay. All right that's just perfectly okay with me." He placed the bills in a pile on the floor beside the driver's seat. Jamie and the driver looked on as he adjusted the flame on his Bic lighter and then set the money afire.

Jamie wailed terribly. The driver wanted to watch the street and Leather Bill with amazed eyes both at once, turning his head rapidly from side to side. "Burning money! On the bus! My Christ! What are you doing! A lunatic on the bus burning money! Get away from that white line!"

Jamie had leaped forward to save the money. She stamped on it repeatedly, shouting along with the bus driver. Leather Bill was ready, the flame on his butane lighter set high as possible, and he blocked her feet with his arms as he knelt by the pile of burning money. Jamie managed to snatch the top few bills from the pile and held them tightly in her fist, but the rest were charred past rescue.

The driver stopped his bus and opened the door, and the three of them regarded the black smoldering heap until it was ash and the smoke had all blown out the door, and the bus ride was definitely over. "Guess nobody's going to Philly now," the driver said.

Jamie ran out of the bus and Leather Bill watched her. "Now look what happened," he told the driver, flabbergasted, leaving.

They stood on the sidewalk, at a loss. They seemed to be far from anywhere worth being. It looked like a nice place to drive around in during the daytime, if you had a car. Jamie had saved thirteen dollars. She was seized with a desire to run back to the dingy bar and find the man who had valued her at twenty. Leather Bill was experimenting with his Bic butane lighter, holding it upside down and trying to keep it lighted. "The gas wants to go up," he told her, "but then it has to go down before it can go up. It don't know what to do." When it exploded in his hand, he stared at his torn fingers through eyes spattered with blood, looking like he didn't know what to do. He turned to her, astonished, wanting some kind of endorsement, some kind of confirmation. "Did you see that?"

"Your fingers are all tore up," she said.

"That's what I mean. That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Did you burn your hand, too?" Jamie said.

He said, "Did I burn it? Yeah I burnt it."

"Does it hurt?" she said.

"Does it hurt?" he said. "Yeah it hurts."

He blew on his fingers and then shook them as if trying to get a bug off his hand. Then he held his hand in his other hand and pretended he wasn't crying. Jamie took wadded pieces of Kleenex from her purse and tried to straighten them out and administer them to the wounded fingers, but the wind blew them away and they went scudding along the sidewalk. Leather Bill noticed that the pain in his fingers was like the dull pain of sadness, the throbbing weight of *this* on top of everything else. But he knew how it went, this story, because it was the story of Leather Bill. Later this would be a part of everything else, and then there would be something else to come on top of *it*, until you're dead. They took a cab to the nearest Emergency Room. Leather Bill took up the middle of the seat, chuckling now and then in disbelief, staring at the injured hand in his lap as if he'd never before had one on the end of that arm. Jamie leaned up against the left-hand window, snuffling and crying and looking out at the shut avenues hard, as if only a while ago she'd owned them. □

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JOHN JUDSON

22 OCTOBER

Dear Grandma,

I saw a lone hawk this morning, high over our bluff.
His eye, like yours, took us and the scene in
and gave all point and latitude.
That's why I'm writing to you now,
that and to tell you what you already know
but never hinted at, for the good of your good God,
and for Grandpa, though now he has grown incontinent.
I know now that, once, you came full circle in your knowledge,
and still the pulse in your writing hand's wrist lifted
hawk sight to us: winter rhythms on wind
over willow and all the fields of brittle, hollow yellow.

Grandma, neither of us is whole, and now you know I know it;
yet we must hope, must talk to counteract the monthly bills,
because we've lived too long beneath real hawks, the high-minded,
studying each to tell the other by letter
what the new ones bring to mind.

Soon I'll return to take you both to Idaho,
and there you'll teach my children how to can string beans;
and grandpa will show us all again how to cut lumber
so the grain of its wood wills its strength to a builder;
and both of you will teach us to speak commonly
of ideals, and your strange ability to honor change.

Then I'll tell you both the parts of my life you've never known,
and how they relate to this, my first and only perfect poem.

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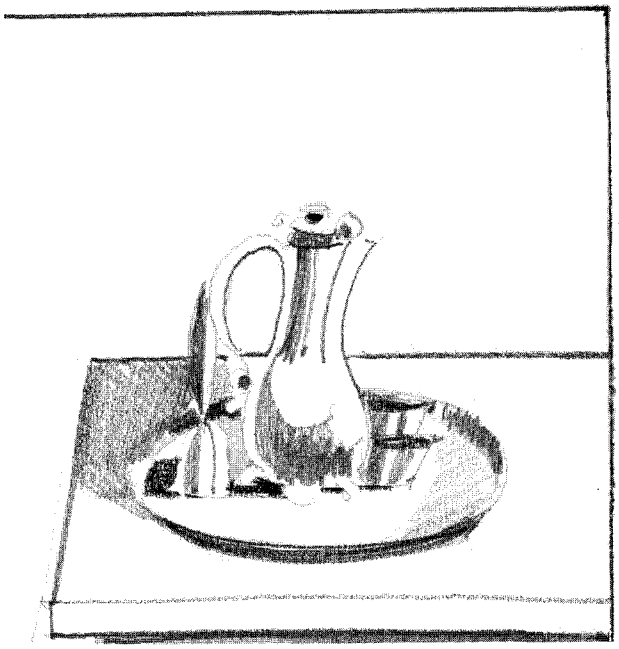
Catherine Petroski



RINGS

The tea bell rings. We put down our work. Aunt Beck has called Sarah, and we are going to have raisin bread and butter sandwiches with real butter and with them Aunt Beck and Grandmama will have some hot sweet tea and I will have milk. I am just a child.

In the summer I am allowed to have sweet iced tea, strong and brown in the glass that soon sweats in the Illinois heat. Aunt Beck sweetens her iced tea when it's hot, and no amount of sugar put in at the table, the way we do at home, makes it as sweet as hers. Soon it will be iced tea weather, and then we will have cucumber sandwiches instead of raisin bread or orange bread or nut bread, which are the things we have had for snacks all winter long. I would like to ask if I could have my milk in a cup with a saucer, so I would at least look like them, but that is silly. I will not ask.

The tea bill rings again. Sarah, Aunt Beck says, is as slow as molasses in January. She asks where that girl is, when she knows she's in the kitchen. Aunt Beck doesn't really want any answer. Aunt Beck, Mama says, is the nervous type. Mama says not to bother Aunt Beck much, so I don't. When I come here, it's to see Grandmama anyway. Aunt Beck will come in for tea time and to say hello, but mostly that's all. Aunt Beck's husband, Uncle Will, died in the hall last summer. I was here. Maybe that's why she's nervous and sometimes snaps. Her words snap, like her black leather purse. She always has Lifesavers. Mama thinks the candy is wrong, but I love it. Mama's birthday is in September, when mine is, and here at Grandmama's we are making a wonderful surprise for her birthday. The bridge cloth and four napkins I am working on now. Even if Mama doesn't play bridge.

Of course I just didn't start right out on it, the actual present. I had to practice first. Grandmama, who isn't really my grandmama but great grandmama and just step besides, had a few lazy daisies she hadn't finished on some pillowcases, and that was where I began. With her sweetsmelling tiny hands, dry and soft, Grandmama showed me. Up in the center point. Make a loop, a big circle with the floss, left to right, always left to right, so. Down again at the center point. Up inside the tip of the petal, so. Pull the loop gently tight, so. And down right outside the petal so.

Everything for Grandmama goes very slowly. Everything has its parts. Everything can be done if you take it apart and do it slowly and put your mind to it. The best thing of all, it worked, whatever Grandmama was showing me. A beautiful daisy petal, I did it. And another, and another, and another, and the whole daisy. I am making Mama something grand, in secret, here in the hushed house with these ladies who know how to do wonderful and beautiful things.

Here is Sarah with the tray, everything rattling. Empty cups dancing in their saucers, spoons ringing together, my milk sloshing almost out of its glass. Sarah puts the tray down by Grandmama's chair and Grandmama begins to pour. Good for you, Sarah, I think, though I don't say. You didn't really spill anything and I know what it is to spill milk or water or get food off the plate. Sarah always rattles like that. She has a resting place in the basement, a chair by the furnace with a curtain on the furnaceroom door. That's where she puts on her uniform when she comes on the bus in the morning and where she has her lunch and where she changes back to some happy clothes when she's ready to go home. Sarah has a black uniform with a white pinafore apron. Sarah's cousin Olive works at our house, but Mama says she put Olive in dove grey.

The telephone. We are drinking our tea and milk, eating our raisin bread. I run so I can answer the phone. It is very different from our phone, which is considered more modern, Mama says. Our phone you talk and listen in the same piece, but the telephone at Grandmama's has two separate pieces. Connected with a wire. You talk in one and you put the other up to your ear to hear. It is a better telephone to use than ours. I am always getting in trouble over our telephone because I lick it.

CATHERINE PETROSKI lives with her husband in a Chicago suburb. Earlier stories by her have appeared in NAR.

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Mama has a fit. Grandmama's phone is not so easy to lick.

So I answer Grandmama's old telephone the way Grandmama taught me. Since they have the same last name we do, I thought it would be nice to answer our phone, the modern one at home, that way. And so I did, and one day it was Daddy and he had a fit. He wanted to know where I learned that sort of foolishness, and then said I didn't have to tell him, he knew.

But here I get to answer it the fancy way. It is Cousin Lyddie who wants us all to come visit her. Aunt Beck takes the phone quickly and talks to Cousin Lyddie for a long time, and I eat my raisin bread and butter and wipe my mouth with the cloth napkin Grandmama did the cutwork on and drink almost all of my milk. They have good sandwiches in this house, but the milk is always too warm.

*

The ring of needles, where is it?

I have brought Grandmama flowers.

Grandmama sends for Sarah. The rose thorns are sticking my hands through the waxed paper I put around the bottom. My friends at school were always bringing Miss Smith special bouquets: yellow pricklestem itchy flowers in the fall, and then pussywillow and forsythia and daffodils and iris and spiraea and mock orange and just before school was over, the roses. You could always tell which bouquets came from their own yards and which they picked on the way to school. The ones from home had newspaper or waxed paper or both around the stems, and usually a rubberband to hold it all together, or a string. The ones from along the way came plain, sometimes with ragged stems, sometimes drooping over. Miss Smith put the flowers all in water, and she smelled them and said how wonderful they smell and thank you, children, they are beautiful.

Sarah is rummaging in the top of the kitchen cupboard, standing on a stool, looking among the various old vases for a round ring of needles, the thing Grandmama has sent her for. Go get the round frog, Sarah, she said. Not the glass one, now, the metal one. Then Grandmama asked me to put the flowers on the table because they must be sticking my hands. Tiny pricks of blood on my fingers. I will get my work dirty.

Grandmama is saying how wonderful, how sweet of you to bring the roses, and she just knows they are from Rob's arbor. Rob is what she calls my granpa, my real one, not her son but another greatgrandma's. Grandpa built the arbor on the other side of our house, and though Grandmama lives just next door, she can't see our arbor. She hardly ever goes out. But she was right, the arbor was in bloom. The roses grew up and over and all twining through the arbor, white painted, like two big upsidedown U's with boards between them and two little seats under, to sit and talk with someone on, only I never could find anybody to talk with on the arbor. The roses grew wildly, and you couldn't sit back too far or you'd get a thorn in the back.

Sarah has found the frog. I can't understand why it's called a frog, but that's what they call them, and I am going to fix the roses in it. The roses are two colors. The Main Street side grows the pale pink rose. It is so pale that it is almost white and you want to get right down close to look at it to make sure that it is really pink after all. The other climber is red, with smaller tighter buds and smaller petals, a pretty regular red. Mama has her other roses, the bushes, but they don't grow nearly as many flowers, though I do like the yellow one. I weed them sometimes, for money, but it's a terrible job. I hate it. Almost as much as I hate trying to stick these rose stems onto the needles in this frog. The dumb frog. When the rose thorns don't stick me, the frog does.

Tiny pricks of blood reform on my fingers. I hide my hands but it is useless.

How beautiful the roses look, dear, Grandmama says. Bring them here and let Grandmama smell them. Oh. Lovely. Just like Miss Smith. I had wanted us to do some hand work today, but my hands are ruined. Grandmama pretends or perhaps really does not notice how they are hidden, how they hurt. I run from the sun room through the living room, through the dining room, through the kitchen where Sarah is fussing to herself over something, down the stairs, and out the back door.

Past the four-o'clocks.

The screen slams a big bang and then a little one and then a littler one. I do not want to go home.

*

Ring, ring. Not the telephone. Not the circular frog that sticks my fingers. It is the all-colored thing that flashes messages at me from Grandmama's finger, a diamond.

Today Grandmama showed me a French knot, but mine are not very good yet. I don't have the parts: They flop all over the place. While I practice, Grandmama is crocheting around a fine linen handkerchief. It was a funny handkerchief to start, not square, but with one of the corners cut away, like somebody had taken a bite out of it. Little holes all on the edge, Grandmama called hemstitching, and then the little silver hook, so little it didn't even look like a hook, goes in the little hole and gets a piece of thread and comes back out and does all kinds of fancy things, so fast I can't keep up with it. I would like to try it, but I know it would be too hard. And all the while the diamond colors go racing up and down the wall, sometimes stopping on the floor, but none of these for very long. On days like this, when the sun is really out, bright, shining clean, Grandmama's diamond makes special colors, as bright as all the floss in her cabinet. As many colors, too, I think, or maybe more. Grandmama tells me the diamond was from Josiah, who was her husband and my real greatgrandfather, but he died. Josiah in the pictures. Josiah in summer suits, white hair. Josiah, the grandfather with the orange groves in Florida, the oil wells, the coal mines, land all over, a winter house in Tampa. Josiah who gave her this diamond and brought her from Indiana, with a trunk of clothes and a cabinet of floss and fancy work. Mama says she hoodwinked the old goat through a lonely hearts and when she came to town all she had was what was on her back and that was it. Mama says she called Josiah Daddy, and he loved it so, she twisted him around her little finger. Grandmama a Quaker, using thee and thou. Mama makes fun of her.

I need a color and Grandmama searches her work basket. It isn't there. Nothing we can use. Grandmama gets up slowly from her chair, which is a magic chair because a footrest comes out of the bottom, and I can't figure out where the ring is that makes it all happen. Grandmama is very tiny, and the rest of the family is tall, except Aunt Beck and she's not really in the family Mama says because she only married Uncle Will. Anyway Grandmama uses the little footrest because her feet won't touch the ground. The footrest has disappeared, become

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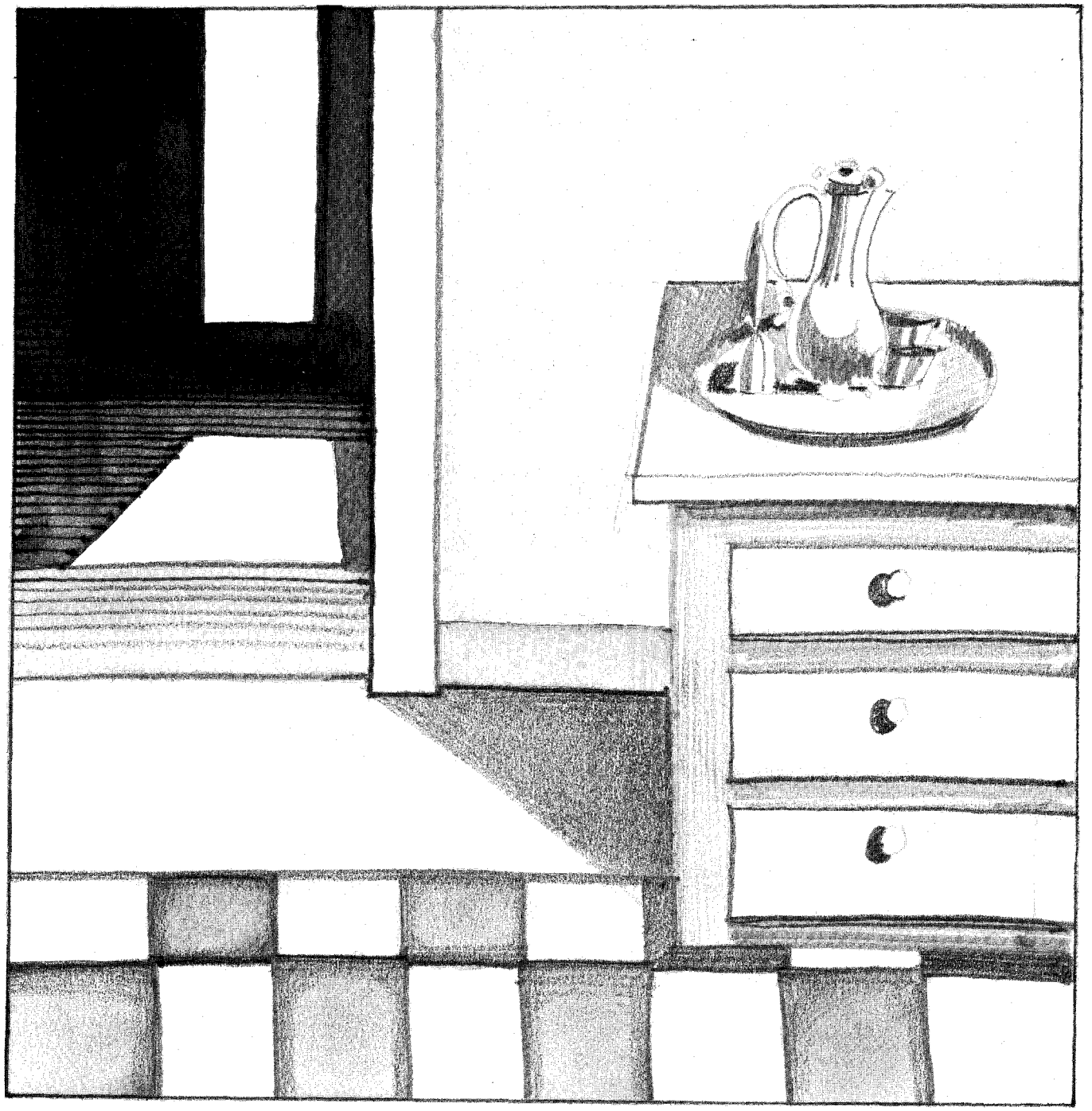

part of the chair. Grandmama calls me to come with her, and I am glad to go with her for she knows about the colors, about the many little drawers in the floss cabinet, about the floss neverending. Grandmama walks very slowly, getting the circulation going. In her bedroom, the biggest one in the whole house, stands her floss cabinet. Place of hair let down and brushed, of lilac silk and ecru lace, purses kept, crystal perfume bottles with tall stoppers, jewelry boxes.

Grandmama pulls out a drawer. Not this, she says. I tiptoe to see what it is we're not going to use. Teal blues, aquas, turquoises, applegreens, watery blues, none just right. Next drawer. Greens: leaf, yellow greens, chartreuses, grass, celery. No, Grandmama says, the diamond still alive in the dull bedroom. Here, I need the chair, Grandmama says, and she climbs up to look in the next drawer: quiet earth greens, sensible, lowvoiced greens, avocados, olives, the greens of late summer and autumn. Let's see, she says, and she slowly takes the skein to the light. The colors run from the diamond and they never all escape. There, says Grandmama, holding up just the right piece of floss. This is the right one. And it was.

And this is something I can give you, she says.

Grandmama says in her will: the diamond will be hers, the little one who pricks her hands on needles of every description. Think of me.

*

The tea bell rings. □

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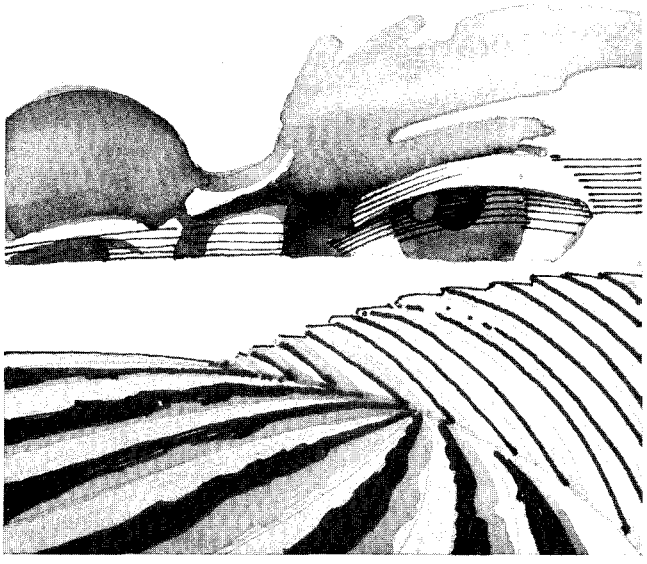
Blossom Shaw



WE'RE BOTH STILL HERE

She shoveled the hard earth while the heat of the sun drew sweat on her forehead and curled the limp hair about her cheeks. Every shovelful of dirt felt heavier than the last, and she wasn't half finished. If she could just stop, walk away, leave. She could go back to her apartment, get a bottle of soda from the refrigerator, and sit down with a magazine. She saw the silent interior of her room, the emptiness of it. Better to be out here under the sky, surrounded with light and space and the veiled sounds of living things. No use hurrying. She had at least twenty more long rows to dig, and then she must go over the garden with a rake, must beat and break the soil until it was smooth and fine and ready for planting.

* * *

Russell Sheets was alone for the first time. Lucy, his wife, had been admitted to the hospital two weeks before. She had gone in the middle of the night with her eyes sealed by pain and her mouth gaping. Now he had to take care of her chickens and eggs, her vegetable garden too. Every evening he drove to town and visited her at the hospital. First he would find the doctor and ask when she could come home. Then he would go to her room and see her there, lying flat on her back with her head propped up and the stiff white sheets tucked around her. They talked about the day when she could leave the hospital. She had sketched a plan for her garden and kept it by her bed. This year, she said, she was determined to try peas again. It's plenty wet, he said and joked, a fella might float on down to Florida and retire. She laughed at that.

Every spring they had daily conversations about the weather; but now, facing each other in that room, the rain and sun and wind were only pictures on the other side of a window. The smell of rubbing alcohol was more real.

When they ran out of things to say, they gazed at the streets and roofs and trees and looked for signs of rain. Or else they turned on the news.

She wasn't in her kitchen, as she usually was, lifting lids off steaming pots and stirring the contents. After supper he didn't go to Stu's for beer and cards as he usually did. In fact, he got up later in the mornings and often went to feed the chickens in his bedroom slippers.

* * *

Russell Sheets walked down the drive to get his mail. It was late afternoon. He looked around, everything was the same. His feet seemed to trip over the pebbles in the lane and the low, blinding sun made his body weak. Two cars whizzed by. They didn't even slow down to look at the sign, FRESH EGGS FOR SALE. Then he saw the girl's car, a beat-up MG. She was here for summer school, had stopped one day for eggs. They had got to talking.

The car turned in and pulled up beside him. He leaned on the open window. The sun in his eyes gave everything a golden blur, and it looked like she didn't have on any clothes. She was wearing a cream colored bathing suit, he saw. Her shoulders were white and smeared with dirt.

"Going to see what Thatcher left for us," he said squinting down at her. "The missus expects a new seed catalogue."

He laughed, "I can tell spring's here by her green thumb. It starts itchin'."

The girl smiled back, "My thumb is more black than green."

"Well," he said, "I reckon you'll develop. There isn't no necessity for a green thumb, you know. If you give seeds their proper place, Nature'll take care of the rest. Now indoor plants. They're different. Those you have to baby. You have to shift 'em around, give them a southern exposure or whatever, fool them into blooming, though it beats me how an African Violet knows the difference. The missus could tell you."

The girl laughed, "I could use a few hints. The last plant I bought lost all its leaves at the bottom."

"She could tell you."

BLOSSOM SHAW also writes poetry, which has been published in Southern Poetry Review *and* Denver Quarterly.

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"When will she be home?" the girl asked softly, trying to keep the pity out of her voice.

Mr. Sheets shrugged and sighed. All day he had wanted to talk to someone about his heavy-laden heart. But he felt that people didn't want to hear about it. Talking didn't really help anyway, didn't take away the fear. But she, the girl, was different.

The girl rested her arm on the back of the seat and looked away at the hills. Her mouth felt stiff with its prolonged smile. She thought, what if he cries?

Finally he answered, again shrugging his shoulders, "The doctors don't say."

"Well get in," the girl said cheerily. "I'll give you a ride to the mailbox and back."

He went around the front of the car, patting the hood with his thick hand. He opened the door and slowly sat himself down with a grunt. Her long, cream colored legs were not two feet away from him. He noticed her tennis shoes were caked with dirt.

"You'll get eaten alive that way," he said.

She blushed a little, "Bugs don't usually like me."

The next time the girl came she asked Russell Sheets if he'd be good enough to lend her a hoe.

"It's really awfully nice of you. Letting me use your land like this. For free I mean."

"Nothin' to it," he said as they walked toward the tool shed. "That pasture is fallow since we sold most of the cows. Ain't nothing there but weeds."

Today he felt he must move more slowly, speak more slowly. The girl was asking him questions.

"Do you think anything will grow there?" she asked.

"She'll grow all right. I'll give you some fertilizer. Tomorrow I'll get out there with a rototiller."

"Really that's nice. But I'm digging it up myself. With a shovel," she added for a joke.

That's a crazy lot of work to do for no good reason, he thought. But he had to admire her gumption. He'd seen others come from the city and start garden plots and let the weeds take over. He'd seen their beer cans lying around grey piles of charcoal. Some of them bought eggs and said they were good. But those kind didn't develop into steady customers. Nobody wanted to drive twenty miles for a dozen eggs and he didn't blame them.

They reached the tool shed and ducked through the low door. The tool shed leaned against one side of the weathered barn. It looked about ready to fall over. It was dark inside and the dirt floor was tracked with grease and sawdust. The workbench was scarred with round hammer blows and covered with junk, jars of nails, saw blades, machine parts, things for which she had no names. Pieces of old harness hung from wooden pegs on the walls, reminding her of old-fashioned days. Once this man had farmed with a team of horses. Her mind suddenly glowed with that thought. Cobwebs made thick as lace by coats of dust hung everywhere.

Mr. Sheets found the hoe and held it out to her proudly.

"You feel how heavy this is," he said. "I made this myself."

She took the hoe and tested its weight appreciatively. Her eyes circled the shed, looking for other treasures.

"What's that thing?"

"That, my girl, is a cider press."

"You made cider?"

"Until the missus got so she couldn't keep up with everything. She's got her garden now. Her eggs. A small garden. That's all we need with the kids gone. They left us, like a sinking ship," he added with anger.

The girl felt her body go stiff. She drummed her fingers on the cider press. Could she say anything? She wanted to say something, to tell him that she knew how it felt to be left alone with the things that reminded you of other days still sitting around, or how it felt to remember the old things when you were far away and knew you could never go back. But she didn't know how to say it.

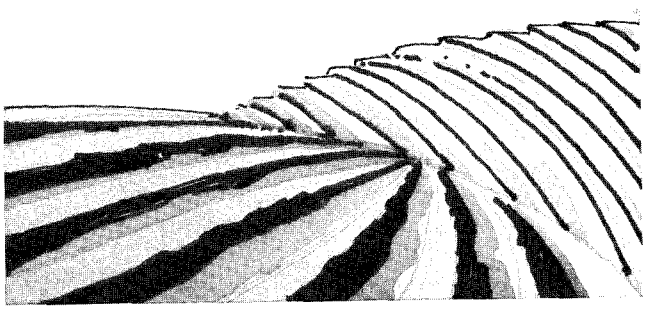
She moved away, further back into the dark shed, attracted by tiny mewing sounds which came from a sack in the corner. She squatted and looked. Inside the sack a mother cat was lying on its side, legs loosely apart, belly swarming with struggling kittens. The girl reached in, like a trespasser. Was there a natural order which she had irrevocably disturbed? Did she knock some kitten out of its rightful place in line?

"Oh cute!" she said as she pulled out one furry body and held it close to her face.

It squirmed and then curled in her hand and lay still.

"Can I have it?" she asked, looking at the cuffs of Russell Sheets' overalls and thinking how many generations of kittens he had seen come and go.

That week it started raining. When she finally got back to the farm she found that her freshly turned earth had been pounded flat by the rain and a dry crust was formed on top. Her garden was located at the low end of a small pasture that bloomed with weeds and clover. On top of a scant hill stood a huge, dead tree. The tree looked as though it had been killed in many ways. The trunk was picked clean of bark, and little worm trails were etched in the grey wood, covering the entire trunk with undecipherable writing, as if a prisoner had been chained



there and had spent his lifetime scratching messages to a world he would never see. Only the major branches were left, and these, bereft of their delicate, shaking twigs, spread motionless against the sky. Even so, the huge round arms of the tree reached and forked so gracefully that they seemed alive. Sometimes she could not stop looking at them. A blackened streak, burned into the wood by lightning, still showed where one part of the tree had been ripped away.

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She climbed up the hill and sat under the tree. She looked up at the sky and down at her garden, at the smallness of it.

She went back and began to slice into the earth with her shovel. She tore out dying grass with her fingers, shaking each clump to separate the humus from the maze of roots before tossing the grass away.

When Russell Sheets drove to the hospital, he saw her faraway figure. She was bent over, one arm reaching down, the other arm cradling a rake.

The fields were still too wet to go in with a tractor. Every day Russell Sheets walked to the north forty and checked. He gazed at the sun, wishing it would draw the water faster. Towards afternoon the clouds would come over and it would rain.

He was tinkering with the John Deere when he saw the girl hiking across the field toward him. She scrambled through the barbed wire fence like a kid and sloshed across the muddy barnyard. His wife never walked in the barnyard without putting on her boots, and then she usually never came out except when the cows were dropping their calves.

"Hello," the girl yelled before she got near, "beautiful day!"

"Yep," he yelled back, "but the man says more rain."

She came up closer to him, so close he thought for a minute she was going to walk right on by and go somewhere else.

"What are these flowers?" She held the wilted stems out to him.

"Some kind of weed. I'm not much of a one for names. The missus could tell you."

The air was fresh. He breathed it in and let it out with a sigh.

"Beautiful day," he agreed.

She let her flowers drop.

They walked toward the house together and sat on two backless chairs under an old apple tree. He brought out two large mason jars full of cider. "The last of it," he said. The cider was thick, murky, sharp, like nothing she had ever tasted before. After a long swig he became cheery. He was a man with a big torso. His overalls bunched around his legs, but the bib and flannel shirt underneath stretched firmly over his chest. His face, neck, and lower arms were brown and weathered, but the top of his forehead and the rim of ankle above his socks were smooth and white. He wore round, battered glasses. The right lens was dark, opaque; and there was no glass on the left side, so his one eye sparkled in the empty frame. His other eye, viewed from the side, was a pinched up, watery slit.

He noticed with approval that her arms and legs were getting brown. At least she didn't look such a naked heifer. She told him that she worked in a library in Kansas City, that she roomed with another girl in a small apartment, that her parents were dead. Since she grew up in the city, she'd never gotten close to a garden before. He told her that he lost his eye when "just a sapling."

He drew his chair forward and touched a large finger to her waist. "Come up to about here on you.

"That day my mother, God give his blessing on her soul, up and sent me to the springhouse to fetch her eggs. The crates must be by the road for the egg man. And, as a feller says, I was keeping my eye so careful in front that I lost sight of what was behind. Mabel, that's what. My big sister. She was creeping up behind me and she had in mind to get me back for Papa giving me the new lamb instead of her. She wanted to see me with egg on my face, as a feller says. And so I had, after she got done shoving me. I reckon I never bawled so hard. I took off running. But she came after me. So I ran harder. And I looked back to see if she was coming and smacked myself right into a fence post my Daddy'd just put in for the new feed lot. I wasn't used to it being there, you see."

Mr. Sheets paused for another swallow of cider.

"Matter of fact it was that post. Right there. The third one from the left. Mabel's gone many years now, but that post and me, we're both still here."

He wiped his lips with his hand and stared. Yes, he had forgotten it was there.

* * *

The fields dried and he started plowing. She planted her garden. When he came over the hill he looked for her. If she was there she rose and waved as the tractor roared slowly by. Mrs. Sheets was still in the hospital.

She held a fistful of dirt. She let it sift between her fingers. Then she opened a packet of lettuce seeds. Lettuce grew from this? A seed so small you could hardly pick it up? She dropped the seeds from the palm of her hand as she walked backwards down the row with her back bent. When the seeds fell they disappeared into the earth so you couldn't tell for sure that the row had been planted. She went back on her hands and knees, covering the invisible seeds with dirt and patting it down. She planted corn, onions, carrots, peas and tomato sets too. Around the outside of her garden she put zinnias. The zinnia seeds were shaped like rockets, streamlined for flight, barbed on the ends for a secure landing.

When she was finished, she stretched her aching back and looked around. The old pasture was lush. She could hear the water running in the creek and feel the sun pouring into her skin, easing her body. She undid the top of her swimsuit and threw it down. Then she pulled off the bottom too and with a loud sigh which she knew nobody could hear, she lay down in the grass and fell asleep.

Russell Sheets, walking slowly back from his pond, saw her stretched out in the field. He went away as quietly as he could.

* * *

Mrs. Sheets was coming home to die and Russell had to think. What must he do? Sell the chickens? The farm? Move to town? Death was close by, but in the meantime they both must live on as they always had. He did plow Lucy's garden, but he never got around to planting it. He had even believed, as Lucy had believed, that she would be well enough to do the work herself.

When Russell Sheets went to town or passed a neighbor, he would smile in a friendly manner. He smiled when he talked to the girl or to the occasional customer who bought eggs. You

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had to smile on your fate, he told himself, otherwise it would buffalo you, turn you to a runny jelly that couldn't stay on the bread. His wife smiled often too, except when the pain made her collapse and moan.

The girl drove out, pulled weeds, and drove away. She said she was busy with school.

Russell Sheets took to walking. He saw his barn, his silo, his house, his field, everything that was his. But nothing was the same. Why, just down the road farmers were subdividing their land for housing developments.

One time he saw the girl by her garden. She was in the company of a man. The corn was up to her knees by now and she was pointing at it. The man wore a jacket and tie and lit a cigarette as he looked. They walked to the hill and sat under the dead tree. Russell noticed that the girl moved away from the man when he grabbed her shoulder. Then he went inside the house; and when he came out again, they were gone. He decided he'd walk to her garden and take a look at it. The missus would be proud of it! The soil was fine and loose. Not a weed interrupted the strips of black earth and green leaves. The young corn rustled and whispered in the wind, and Mr. Sheets nodded his head up and down as if in answer.

He never saw the man there again.

She chopped the hard cracked earth with his hoe. The handle of the hoe was as familiar to her as the steering wheel of her car. The sun beat down and she tasted the soil on her fingers when she tried to brush the strands of hair out of her mouth. She looked around. Every kind of plant was a different shade of green, the grass, the clover, the trees, the bushes. She let her toes dig into the soil and knew she was sad that the varieties of people could not bring such peace, that no one extraordinary was there with her.

* * *

When she was done she took his hoe back.

She found him in the barn scooping grain.

"I'll be leaving soon," she said.

He stopped working. His sleeves were rolled up, showing his knotted brown arms, and he was breathing hard. She had taken him by surprise. She looked down at her brown legs in the dim, dusty light of the barn.

"School's over," she said, and then, rushing the words as though hoping to pass by the meaning without having to look at it, "I . . . I'm afraid I'll have to give you back your kitten. The place where I live . . . in Kansas City, well, they don't allow pets. I'm sorry. I should have thought . . ."

Mr. Sheets leaned toward the girl. Thick white hairs curled on the brown V of skin where his shirt opened at the neck.

"Don't you worry," he said, his voice deep, kind. "One kitten more won't matter, no sir."

He took hold of the girl's arm just above the elbow and squeezed her strongly, as though he were reassuring a startled horse.

She felt his warm thumb push into her bone and suddenly she felt happy.

Before leaving she picked some zinnias from her garden. She wanted to give them to Mrs. Sheets.

"Go right in," Mr. Sheets said. "Lucy's in the parlor."

The girl had never been in the house before. There was worn linoleum covering the floors and many faded rag rugs. The front porch and kitchen smelled richly of apple baskets and empty milk cans. In the dining room there was a big heavy table covered with oilcloth. One plate sat on the table and on the plate were left a few pieces of ham fat neatly pushed to one side. Along one wall stood a server whose top was completely covered with family photographs. The girl peered at the faces but recognized none of them. Cousins, aunts, brothers. But no picture of Russell as a young man. She went into a room that had a large gas heater, but the room was empty. Then she turned and went back through the kitchen to another door. In there she found Mrs. Sheets lying on a day bed. She tiptoed to the bed.

"Mrs. Sheets," she called softly, not wanting to disturb her if she were sleeping.

Lucy Sheets' hands, which were bent and knobbed with arthritis, nestled by a strangely soft and pink cheek.

"Yes?" She raised herself up on her elbow.

"Here's some flowers for you. Shall I put them in a glass?"

"Yes. That's nice." The voice struggled to sound normal, to not give away the awful fact she was a dying woman.

The girl went into the kitchen and opened several cupboard doors before she found a glass. She put the flowers in water and set them on the table next to the bed. Mrs. Sheets still leaned on her elbow.

"You must be Paula," she said, extending the other shaking arm. "Russell has told me about you and your garden."

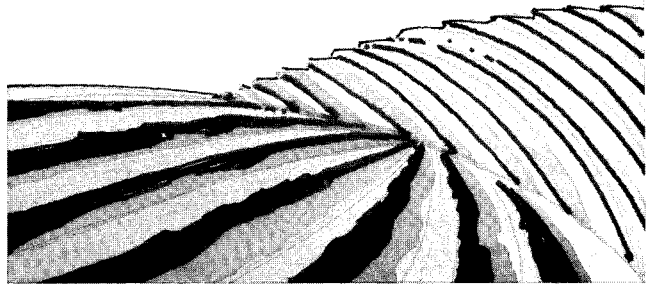
Paula began to straighten the flowers in the glass. Her legs were reluctant to move closer to the white arm, the white pillow, the odor of long, tortured nights.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked.

Lucy Sheets sank back.

"I'm all right."

Then she seemed to be somewhere else. Paula stood. But Mrs. Sheets' eyes remained closed in sleep or in deep tiredness. The girl reached over and touched the old woman's cheek. "Goodbye," she whispered, and tiptoed out.



The garden grew luxuriantly. Russell Sheets went there often to pick beans and corn for dinner, and these Lucy enjoyed eating when the pain wasn't too bad.

The garden grew basketfuls, choking out the weeds. Tomatoes rotted on the vines. Until a fall frost turned the plants black and made them sink to the ground, but by then the girl was gone. □

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Pamela Painter Skeen

NIGHT GAME

The three of them were driving all night. They were headed back to the Hilton Hotel in Athens. A telegram had been sent with their mail to the Youth Hostel just as she and Jim were leaving Thessaloniki for Philippi and Thassos to see the classic plays in the old theatres. It called them back to Athens saying the government couldn't guarantee their safety unless they returned to the city. There, protection and hotels were assured. The 'Government' was not identified. It was an order.

One of the clerks, Niki, who had talked and gestured nonstop two days before when he met them in a taverna, went into the kitchen and packed them a sack of food—two cheese pies, bread, sausage—saying "keep driving." He wouldn't answer any questions, pretending not to understand Prin's Greek without the background of music and retsina. He just muttered "governments" and walked them to the old Buick, then turned around and went back inside. Firmly closing the heavy door. He hadn't looked back.

And now she was driving. Her hands hanging on the wheel with a heaviness meant to control. From time to time her fingers would go to sleep but then the numbness scared her more. One at a time she shook her hands, flexed the fingers, grew more alert as they tingled, almost hurt, from the return of circulation.

Jim, her husband, was asleep in the back seat using a sleeping pack for a pillow. They had been traveling for most of June and July ever since they had finished classes and sublet the apartment till September. They had flown to Paris, leaving England for the following summer, and traveled slowly south to Italy. Greece had been her idea. They had no time schedules for sightseeing, eating, making love. Just whenever, whatever happened was all right with them. Until now—she could almost feel the change. She could see his hunched shoulders in the rear view mirror. He hadn't moved since he left the wheel, giving her breast a soft pat. The gesture had annoyed her.

Now, Brodie sat beside her playing a small harmonica. Telling her to name another song. Finding chords. He had joined them about five miles out of Thessalonika from behind a sign reading 'Athens.' The news had reached him too. His first words "Christ, you're from the States," made them all laugh with relief, homesickness. And now his gear was tied on top of the small sedan; theirs filled most of the trunk, spilled over into the back seat.

The chords moved into "When the Saints" and she sang along for the first few measures, surprised at finding the words, until she ran out of their memory. Where had she dredged up that title anyway? But the music was all there and she could hum along, softly following the song to its close, waiting as he chorded another, recognizing it and again finding enough words for a few lines here and there.

"Name another," he said, still holding the harmonica against his mouth. His lips were full, his mouth wide. The harmonica would be warm, moist.

"Just play," she said.

"Hey," he said, "I'm keeping *you* awake. It has to be something you know."

"I know them all," she said. "I just can't remember names. Go on, play."

He shrugged and drifted into what she thought was "Red River Valley." She came up with a few words to show him her intentions were good. From there he stayed in the same key and picked up "Don't Fence Me In" and she sang along with that for a while too.

They stopped for gas in a small town. Prices had gone up from 7 to 9 drachmae. Six or seven men were sitting outside the station, talking. They all turned to watch the car pull up to the pump. One of them came over to fill their tank and then before giving her change went back with her money to the group of men. Another stood up as though his back hurt him, stood up and peered at them.

"Tell them to keep moving," she pieced together from the sentences he said. "They can't stay here." His tone wasn't hostile. Those were the facts. And we won't, she thought, if the car holds out. It was overheating again, they'd have to rest it a while and then drive slower. The night seemed to stretch before her into an infinite amount of mountain turns and curves.

Jim sat up as they pulled away and then slumped back against the pack once more. Brodie fumbled through a few measures of "Never on Sunday" before returning to the old songs.

Finally the music stopped. "You O.K.?" he asked. She nodded and Brodie too hunched up against the door, leaving her alone with the vast night that stretched away into darkness on either side of the road as if oceans were lapping soundlessly at the pavement's edge. Just as oceans circumscribed most of Greece. She had always hated driving at night: not knowing what lay beyond the brush that caught the soft gleam of headlights. Often she and Jim had camped just barely off from the deserted road in that same ocean she dreaded, only to wake up the next morning to softly rolling hills and hard solid earth. It had been safe in Greece. Now the sunrise was hours away and still the only danger in this hot, slow-moving country seemed to be the trip past the limits of their rest.

The road pulled her along for two hours or more until in desperation she pushed the window vent open to let in a cool

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PAMELA PAINTER SKEEN teaches in Chicago, and has stories forthcoming in Transatlantic Review *and* Colorado Quarterly.

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stream of air that wakened her face. She sat up straighter, arching her back.

When she felt her eyes close for the second time she pulled to the side of the road and stopped the car. The silence startled her and she prodded gently at Brodie's shoulder calling his name. He said, "Yeah, I'm ready to drive," and walked around the car as she slid across into the passenger's seat. Breadcrumbs sanded her legs.

"What time is it?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"I don't know. Close to two, I think." She couldn't see her watch. She could tell Brodie was still sleepy. She'd talk to him soon but she needed a short nap first before she could concentrate or care where he was from, where he was going, who he was. They had only about four or five hours to go—if they stayed alive. She bunched Brodie's jacket under her head and leaned back on the seat. His smell would be more familiar to her than any other knowledge she had of him. He started the car and edged up onto the road. Soon they were moving on and she could feel herself drifting off to the drone of the car's engine.

She woke with a start when she realized that the car had slowed almost to a stop, was slowly moving to the center of the road.

"Brodie," she shook his arm and his head jerked up, his eyes went wide with fear.

"You were falling asleep, weren't you?" she accused.

"Christ! Must have been," he said. He rubbed his eyes.

"Want me to drive?" She pushed herself up straight against the back of the seat. His jeans seemed to catch and pull on her cotton skirt.

"I'll be O.K. You must still be dead." He glanced over at her, then back to the road.

Jim mumbled something from the back seat and Prin turned to smooth his jacket up over his exposed back. Then she pulled her canteen out of her pack and splashed some water on her face before drinking. It tasted cool, but no longer fresh. The road stretched in front of them, from time to time silver rocks appeared at the side as if brought to life by the headlights of the car. Brodie held out his hand and she watched as he took a long drink and handed it back to her. His hands hung loosely on the steering wheel.

They rode in silence for a half hour or so and soon her eyes began to close, the pull of lids against the dryness of her corneas, the sealing of the membranes when they met. When the car swerved she instinctively reached for the wheel, her hand closed on Brodie's, his arm was against her breast. And then she felt her cheeks go warm and she wasn't sure the car had swerved or if the motion had been her own drifting into sleep. She leaned back, but closer to him. Still scared, but awake now.

"It was a dead animal," he said. "You were falling asleep again. Maybe Jim is ready to drive?"

She turned around and pushed at him. "Jim. Jim? Can you drive now? We're almost there."

"Sleep just a little longer," he said. He didn't open his eyes, didn't say anything more.

She turned around. "Sorry I grabbed the wheel. Christ, I could have wrecked us."

"Forget it," he said patting her leg. She moved under his touch. He left his hand there, warm on her leg as if her skirt didn't exist between the two.

They rode in darkness for a few more miles and she had almost forgotten his hand was there when he began to move it along her leg, moving her skirt higher on her thigh. This time she didn't move, either nearer to him or away and his hand instead went higher until it had found the center of her. But again she didn't move and so he glanced over at her and raised his hand to her blouse, to where the lacings held the front together and then his hand was inside, moving down over her breast, her nipple in between two fingers, back and forth.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. Not sleepy now but knowing he wasn't either. Allowing herself to take her eyes off the road. Leaning back as his fingers made hard rocks of her nipples and wondering if her breasts too gleamed like silver under the clear Greek night.

When his hand moved down again, she moved too, away from him, her back against the door, his jacket fallen somewhere there, her knees up and her legs parting for him. And he had only one hand on the wheel but somehow they were safer now and his other hand tugged at her pants, pulled them toward him and off. He tucked them into a pocket while she waited more awake than she'd been in two days. And then he was with her again, first pressing the flat of his hand down on her stomach to the soft mound of her hair before his fingers outlined her, before his fingers moved in and around, rhythmically, evenly, knowing the direction without ever taking his gaze from the road.

And then finally her legs came together fast and she held them both still, her and Brodie, while her pulse still seemed to beat only there.

She lay back for a while, his fingers quiet, and still with her. And then she pulled away from him and sat up. The crumbs again sanded the back of her legs, emphasized pleasantly where they were. She pushed her skirt down to slide across to him. They kissed gently, his head bent to hers, and then she moved her lips to his neck, her cheek against his cotton shirt. The car slowed slightly and then resumed its pace. He had his arm around her and the muscles pulled along her back as she moved her hand to his zipper and tugged it down and then unsnapped the top before moving her hand inside his jeans to bring him out, already hard. She held him still in her hand until her temperature became his and then she began slowly to move her hand up and down, stopping only to transfer the saliva she had collected in her mouth to her hand and then to him to move more easily, as easily as his fingers had moved for her, and she was moving again, applying only a slight pressure as she pulled up and over the head and back again toward the base, toward the soft warmth, and up again in rhythm.

And then he too was done. His liquid and hers smeared on his belly. Her hand at rest on his leg, her head on his shoulder, his left hand still on the wheel. Still on the winding road to Athens.

They rode that way for what seemed forever, awake, the tension still in her back and his arms. When they came to a sign that said Athens 50 kilometres she sat up and searched around his pockets for her pants. He opened the window and let the cooler night air in. They both laughed.

Soon near Daphne, houses sprouted from the ground and a haze seemed to rise from the earth. Prin turned and

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nudged Jim who at first ignored her and then slowly sat up.

"We're almost to Athens," she said.

"Maybe I should drive now." He squinted into the morning light. Brodie pulled to the side of the road and Jim got out of the car and urinated with his back to them, setting them apart, Brodie and her in the car, Jim outside, once more.

When they stopped for gas at Syntagma they used the restrooms to wash up. The owner watched them as if he wanted to say something, but he too was silent. It had become a different country with a strange climate overnight. Prin wished there were a market near. They returned to the car and ate the last of the cheese pies. Ten more kilometres.

They were within the city limits in a half hour. Gaudy painted words on the walls and sides of the white buildings proclaimed the changes which had taken place. Words Prin found hard to read—paint dripping letters to the line below. General someone leads the Greek people. The War of something. An armored truck moved with sporadic grace in front of them a few blocks before going down a side street.

"Where are you going?" Jim asked, glancing back at Brodie.

"American Express, I guess." He shrugged to Prin. "I'm going to head home. Maybe finish my dissertation like I ought to. Wonder how soon we can get out of here."

"I hate to leave," Jim said vaguely. "We'll be holed up at the Hilton if that telegram meant business. Maybe we'll see you there."

A few people hurried through the streets, no longer directionless as in the week before. Jim maneuvered the car along the outskirts of the city until he could zero in on Syntagma Square. The Parliament building glistened in the sun. Debris lay strewn in the square and on the steps. Posters, handbills, torn and dirty. They separated Brodie's pack from theirs. Put canteens away. Threw out dried bread. People stood waiting outside for the office to open, watching them. Tired Americans. Too tired to talk about their situation.

"Want us to wait?" Jim asked Brodie.

"No need," Brodie said. "I'm just checking in, then I have a friend with an apartment near the Plaka. But maybe you two would want . . ."

". . . I think we better get over to the Hilton," Prin interrupted him, "They seem to be expecting us—although it'll be a first for me." Brodie nodded. Then he held out his hand to Jim. "Thanks for the ride. No telling where I'd be now." Then he took Prin's hand. They smiled at each other. Brodie's wide mouth that she would remember for a long while.

"Thanks for keeping me awake," he said.

"Likewise." Brodie gave her hand a squeeze and bent down to pick up his gear. They waved to him as he got in line. Then they were on their way. Prin felt her eyes close. They'd probably be home within a week. But first, all things being equal—and in Greece they never are—she would sleep. □

DAVID RAY

MUMMIES & OTHERS

Once Philip IV scared hell out of himself
having the tombs opened so he could see his ancestors,
his gramma, grampa, cousins, a lady or two.
Many died young in those days, diphtheria, wrath,
even the son who'd helped him review
the troops along the river, feathers
on their hats waving in the wind.

But I don't have to go to the Escorial.
The mind does quite a good job, thank you very much,
bringing them all back, misshapen, bulb-
eyed, hag-breasted, so they can scare hell
out of me, the living dead, like the mummies
of Guanajuato if you prefer Mexico
where your cousins and mine, these inamorata,
twist and writhe, Old World, New World,
what the hell, they writhe.

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TWO POEMS

FELIX POLLAK

TALKING BOOKS

I.
The darkbrown cardboard boxes
with metal corners bear the imprint
FREE MATTER FOR THE BLIND PROPERTY
OF U.S. GOVERNMENT. They come by mail
and bring in a sour institutional waft
of air. They give me the willies.

II.
They are patient and sit still,
like regular records, or books.
They bide your time, and wait.
When you, finally, ask them to talk,
they become human. They throw away
their black glasses and white canes
and—surprisingly—speak your
language, if with slightly
foreign accents. They even smile or laugh
and can be mildly bawdy. Some repeat
ancient sentences your eyes remember.
Their voices are *ersatz* out of tin cans,
yet they're a blessing.

III.
The intimate tête-à-tête
of needle and disk ended,
the milky collisions
—light against muteness—
begin again, the visual
speaking in tongues, the garbled braille
of reality,
the unbreakable code of black holes
in a sky of vapors. . . .
The anticipation of a voice out of
a tin can burns through my sleep
like a candle.

RICHARD GROSSMAN

HOG

They call me lardbucket which is a
squeal. Funnier things, however, have been spoken.
We have seven months to figure out existence
and then the clock runs out. I haven't

got there yet, but I will. Perhaps life is
tankage (that makes sense). Or perhaps a truffle.
I met a barrow once who told me life was a sow.

My first indication of meaning was those slats
of the creep. A refuge from weight. And
when I saw a piglet crushed by its mother I knew
what a little space can mean. In any case:
not enough has been said on the value of Jews
who must have been taught the secret somewhere
along the way.

We hogs are smart. We know the game and the rules.
Within the game is another game

which is never worth the price of processed food.

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ROBERT DANA

BURNING THE STEAKS IN THE RAIN

reflections on a 46th birthday

Age will come suddenly
the mirror says

Overnight perhaps
like a cough

And the eyes will water
the hand slow

I'm now at least thirty-five
the mirror says

But my eyes see
in their own pupils

the young boy
who's always there

Frightened
Looking

as if it were still dusk and years ago
and he

still waiting before a darkened house
its pines

porch pillars
and deep shadowed bays

Waiting still
for a glimpse of the only girl whose touch can heal

Into his
hands

this morning
not mine

the three pair of socks
dark

and dull as heartbreak
fall from their wrappings

*

The hand
is a hard intelligence

A lover of contradictions
should a dull gift matter

At noon
my young son calls long distance

In the evening
my daughters

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They say
Father we remembered

And home from work
my second wife

kisses me
from my thick neurotic sleep

Beyond the windows
the wind runs the high grass

Silvery
Wavering

Then rushing
in long sweeps

We sit and watch it and think of fire
or the sea

*

Evening
on the dark lake

The last boat
growls toward the pier

and rain
drives the empty park

sweeping the trees
like a celebration

Nevertheless
the steaks are burning

Over your cloth
of red and yellow flowers

the gift of my desires
opens

Wife
I want to grow up at last

I want patience
the passion of my children

I want to learn your name
for wild Iris

I want to walk again
by the sea

I want two friends
you and one other

I want to love you
in a field of lightning

to risk death
on your body

I want to live
another long year

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A Fictional Essay by William McMillen

AMERICAN STAMPS ☆

I know an apocalyptic story:
A man somewhere, in Florida, I think, decided to send a friend a present. A birthday was involved. The postage was itself the present. A plate block of valuable stamps: Lincolns, that black 16¢ Lincoln. He requested the P.O. hand cancel the stamps very lightly. The P.O. agreed. But when the stamps arrived, they were blotted out by cancellation. Purple dye, slightly wet. The stamps were ruined.

Plate blocks are sophisticated. They are clean. Four stamps and one number. Numbered like a zip code before there was a zip code. Now, every color has a number and plate block collecting is confusing and not so much fun. You almost have to collect sheets. Who can afford that? The blocks I have I keep in a photo album.

State Centennial Commemorative: Wisconsin, 1948.

I sit in a pew near the front of the right side of the Presbyterian Church. I always hide a stamp in my right palm and examine it throughout the service. A row of old ladies sits behind me. I have never taken a foreign stamp to Church.

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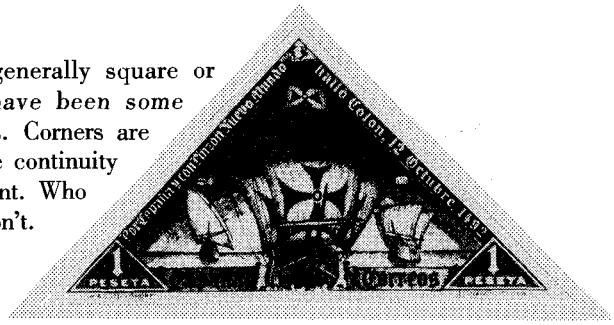

American stamps are generally square or rectangular. There have been some unnecessary exceptions. Corners are important for stamps—they give continuity with envelopes. That is important. Who sends triangular envelopes? I don't.

On the back pages of comic books were ads for ordering 500 or 1,000 or 2,000 foreign stamps for a quarter or fifty cents. Unsorted, they said. They wanted me to believe that there were undiscovered treasures.

In the northern Midwest the cold hangs on windows until late March: Then ice cracks; the mail comes through! The P.O. gets shipments of commemoratives. No more regular Presidents' issues. The old ladies come out of their screen-porched houses. They are safe now that the ice is off the sidewalks. They no longer fear breaking a hip. They find me and give me torn envelopes with foreign stamps. Exotic animals. Black Presidents of African Nations. The stamps are on letters from missionaries. One envelope still has the letter inside. I read it and cry.

Our P.O. is so small we do not have Box Numbers or Street Addresses. The Postmaster's name has always been Howard Gaffney. His brother, Eldon Gaffney, was my seventh and eighth grade teacher.

53952

I hate zip codes. My zip code is 53952. I do not use it on *my* first class mail.

The most beautiful American stamp has Japanese cherry blossoms in front of the Washington Monument. They are pale pink against a pale blue sky. The white monument is in the background.

SCOTT'S

My album is SCOTT'S, of course. But I have not kept up with the years. No one in this small village carries the Supplements. There is very little demand. Life is hard. No luxuries. I walk to the P.O., buy my stamps if there are any new ones, and then walk. Many streets do not have sidewalks and I walk on the tar roads. In winter there is ice and snow everywhere. In summer the tar is soft and sandburrs catch on my pants if I walk beside the road. So, I must keep my stamps in envelopes in the back of the album. One envelope for each year. Someday I may go somewhere and buy the Supplements.

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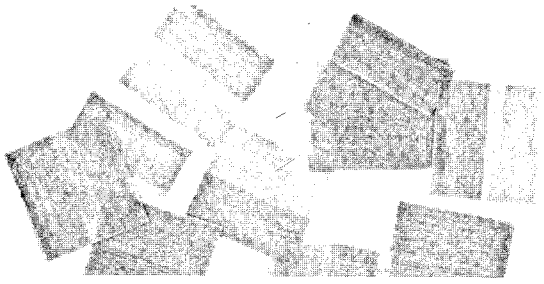

I **hate hinges** but I have to use them. All collectors do.

My Uncle died and my Aunt sent me his stamps:
She wrote that he wanted me to have the stamps. She sent them in two shoeboxes tied together. She used a meter sticker for postage and did not buy stamps. I felt she dishonored my Uncle. I still have the shoeboxes. One holds doubles. The other is near me just in case.

Eldon Gaffney taught me we were allies with Russia during World War II. I did not believe it although I did read what he had said in the textbook. Then I looked carefully at my stamps. The cents sign. Before and during World War II the cents sign was written like this: ¢

or like this: ¢

The Sickle. The Russian Sickle!

After World War II the cents sign changed right away. It looked like this: ¢

or like this: ¢

or like this: ¢

That is the truth. But it does not matter. Just look now at the Kennedy half-dollar. A hammer and sickle right below the profile. Disgraceful!

When it is warm, I sometimes sit on the ledge in front of the P.O. The ledge is separated from the P.O.'s front window by eight inches of dirt. An employee plants red geraniums in the late spring. I don't think the P.O. employees like me sitting there—near their geraniums and their window and front door. But what what can they do? I know it is federal property, as much mine as theirs. I would like other citizens to sit by me but they don't. They hurry in and out. They buy any stamp without looking at it. I don't understand them.

I work on my stamps in the late afternoon:
I have a desk by a west window upstairs. The upstairs is closed off but I have a space heater. I am usually plenty warm. If it is very cold, I will take SCOTT's downstairs and sit on the couch and turn the pages.

My most valuable stamp is from the old National Parks series. The 1930's series. The stamp is an uncancelled 10¢ Great Smoky Mountain gray-black worth $1.65 in the 1968 SCOTT'S. I'm sure it is worth a great deal more now. It is a fine American stamp.

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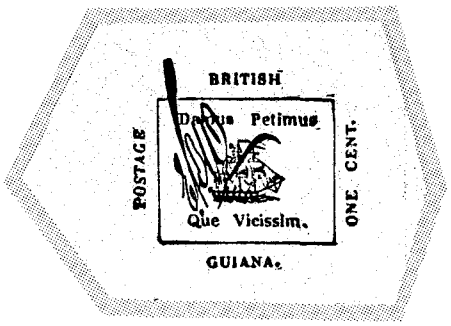


For a nickel, I once bought a fascimile of the world's rarest stamp. I wish I had my nickel back.

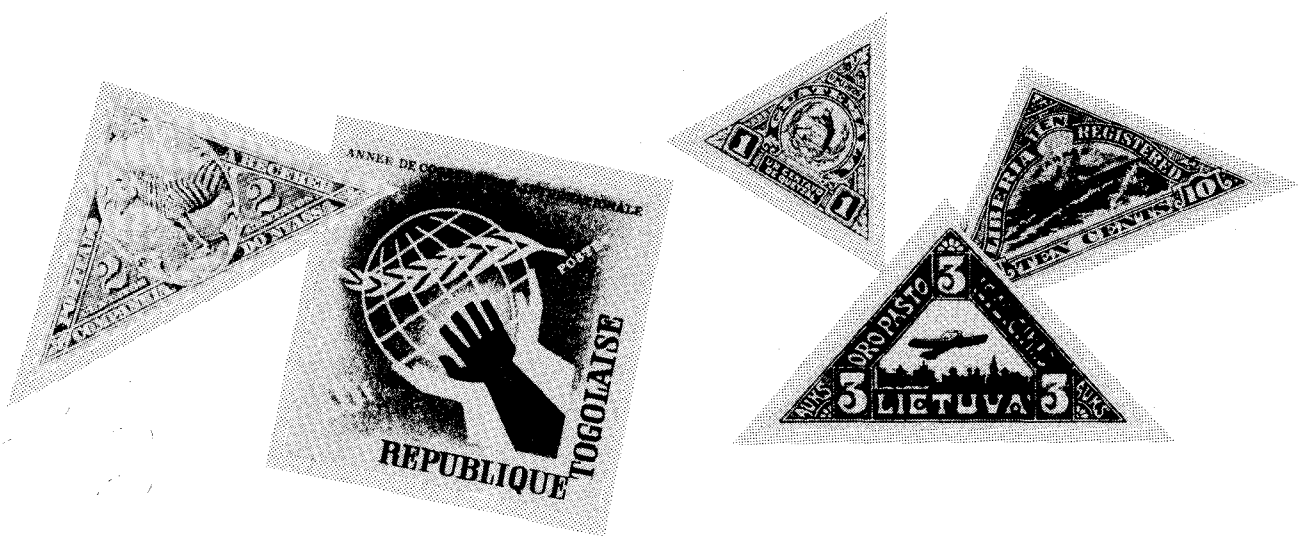
I often read Mr. W. Dwight Burroughs' book, THE WONDERLAND OF STAMPS although it is quite old. The book belonged to my grandfather and is dated 1910. There is a lot about foreign stamps which I read over quickly. But there are other fascinating insights like the following which is one of my favorites:

"In 1902 the United States government paid its first postal tribute to an American woman, by placing the picture of Martha Washington on one of its stamps. In that year there was a reissue of stamps, and several new denominations were added. The eight-cent stamp, gray-violet in color, was the one selected to bear the portrait of the first lady of the land."

Watermarks always bother me because you can't see them. I never bought a watermark tray. I hate old stamps. Old stamps have watermarks. I mainly collect commemoratives. I used to collect plate blocks. But no more.

FOREIGN

I have acquired hundreds, no, thousands, thousands upon thousands of foreign stamps. I have a drawer for them. The bottom drawer of my old wooden desk. I cannot sort them. I know most of them are worthless. They are in fantastic shapes. Diamonds. Long triangles. Circles—one was a circle with a parrot inside. Sometimes I pull open the drawer and gaze down. It is like looking into a jungle. No book could hold them all. No book, not even SCOTT'S.



53952

I will refuse the next old lady who offers me foreign stamps. She does not know what evil she holds in her hand. I fear for my life.

WILLIAM McMILLEN has published short stories in Prairie Schooner *and* The Ohio Journal. *He lives in Athens, Ohio.*

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EVERETTE MADDOX

RUTLEDGE YOUNGBLOOD REFUSES TO LIE UNDER THE BANYAN TREE ANY MORE

Rutledge has made up his mind
this is the last day he will lie
at length in his glinting hair
his eye fixed on a fig
his toes alive in the permissive mud.

Out beyond these roots in a pool
clear by day dark by night
purple eels jiggle:
that is another universe of course
but that is not where Rutledge lives
and neither is this.

Though the air is thick with bells
bizarre with flutes
Rutledge lies on his belly now
billowing like a child's balloon
and it means nothing to him
that ultimates and ultimates buoy him up.

He will leave in the morning
by the ordinary door
and walk in the shrill grey streets
in the old soot and sunshine.
He has learned all he needed to know,
what he already knew: that he is happy.

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Judith Kegan Gardiner / Diane McWhorter

Christina Stead: Dark Places of the Heart

Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife), by Christina Stead. Random House, $8.95.

Saul Bellow said that Christina Stead should have received the 1976 Nobel Prize for literature. Now seventy-five years old, Stead is author of twelve novels and many short fictions dating from 1934 to 1976, of which *Miss Herbert (The Suburban Wife)*, is her most recent. Praised by many writers, including Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Elizabeth Hardwick, she is still almost unknown to American readers.

Stead combines an extremely broad range of interests with a deep, satiric penetration into the "dark places of the heart." She is a brilliant chronicler of the politics of the family and a comprehensive analyst of the psychology of money. A third-generation Australian, her own breadth of experience is wide, and her novels are European rather than English in scope. Almost coeval with our century, she records our times with persistent humor and vision. She left Australia for England in 1928. In the early 1930s she lived in Paris and toured Europe, working as a bank clerk and learning about finance. In the 1940s she moved to America with her husband William Blake, a Marxist writer and banker. The two wrote briefly for M-G-M. Then Stead lived in England for many years. After the death of her husband, she returned to Australia, where she is now honored and renowned. Her novels trace a similar circuit in their settings, first European and Australian, then American, then English.

In comparison to her earlier work, *Miss Herbert* is a restrained and narrow book. In 1975 Barbara Baer reported that Stead was uncomfortable with the growing reputation of *The Man Who Loved Children* and that she would rather be unread than puffed by the contemporary women's movement. She resisted the attempt to see that novel as a statement about women, the family, or marriage. In contrast, *Miss Herbert* almost seems to be playing with the women's liberation movement by superimposing two genres popular in recent women's fiction: the autobiography of the emerging artist and the monologue of the trapped, victimized housewife.

Miss Herbert is the story of Eleanor Herbert Brent Charles from the ages of twenty-five to about fifty-five—a woman, like Stead herself, only a little younger than the century. Eleanor has a restless, promiscuous youth; a dull, bourgeois marriage; than a long period of separation and divorce. Finally she becomes a successful writer and literary agent. Sometimes she engages our sympathies, particularly in her struggle to support her children, and we applaud her when she breaks into her husband's apartment and steals his neatly-filed love letters from many mistresses. Moreover, Eleanor is an indefatigable worker, a trait that she seems to share with her prolific author. Yet Stead frustrates our attempts to cast *Miss Herbert* as a portrait of the artist as a middle-aged woman. Eleanor is never more than a minor literary hack, and the section of the novel devoted to her career is labeled "the guinea pig."

Eleanor is not a heroine, not the author's *alter ego* or ours, but she does represent our times. She is sexy and wild in the '20s; sober, industrious, and married in the '30s; a grass widow during the Second World War, which she scarcely notices. In the late '40s and '50s she becomes an independent divorcee and literary character, a gossip, and an anticommunist. The novel thus belongs to the current spate of satiric-sympathetic portraits of conventional women trapped by their social roles because they don't perceive any doors out.

When the novel opens, Eleanor is a beautiful woman with clear and proper goals:

> I want to marry and have my own home and have my children and then I want to be a person in my own right! I'm going to write. . . . Society wants us to be happy, doesn't it? And it's our natural right.

She thinks and speaks of herself as an engaged girl waiting for her dull doctor fiancé to finish his training, but she is already bored with virginity and idleness. She travels and becomes the mistress of many men. Then she works as a hotel chambermaid, thrilling to feel society's dirty linen, to arouse the men who pinch her in the halls, to spy the men who "do their business" in the middle of the floor. Like many Stead novels, *Miss Herbert* shows the stages of the heroine's life by the places she lives. From the hotel she moves to a poor bachelor apartment where she pretends to give "lessons" to paying lovers. Then she joins a religious hostel with its secret club of mistresses of the society's benefactor. Through the hostel she meets her husband, a pretty, ambitious Swiss whom she marries without love because she is thirty: "Eleanor suddenly saw in marriage an ideal system for saving money and growing comfortable." Her deceived and respectable married life centers not on her husband or even on the care of her two children, which was "endless, unpleasant, and regulated to the smallest detail," but on their house, which she repairs, economizes on, and transforms. There she takes in boarders and relaxes into homey, goodhearted and slightly slovenly neighborliness.

Like the title of the novel, Eleanor's life is divided. She thinks of herself always enclosed in parentheses, "(The Suburban Wife)," even though she never enjoys the substance of the role. During the years she lives with her husband, she ignores the "awful dullness" of "looking blandly into each other's alien faces." She solaces herself with magazine clichés: they are going through a period of adjustment; she must take the bitter with the sweet.

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After her husband's abandonment, insults, and infidelities finally convince her that he wants a divorce, she slides gracefully into the role of "the English lady of fine character and decent upbringing" shamefully tricked by a devious continental. Finally, she plays the hardworking widow slaving for her children's survival. Everything that doesn't fit the right pattern she denies, and that is nearly everything that she does. While promiscuous herself, for example, she chatters about needing to wait for her fiancé, and she fatuously patronizes her Parisian friends who are living together.

Yet Eleanor Brent has a lively physical existence that she rarely acknowledges to herself. Men call her Venus, but she is a Venus not yet emerged from the foam. Beautiful, she never gives and seldom inspires love. All her married life she keeps her sensual self suppressed: "She was not very interested in Heinz as a man. . . . She was indifferent to his character," and Henry later complains of her coldness to all his mistresses. As a middle-aged divorcee, she becomes one of Stead's slightly crazy celibates: "the idea of sexual relations between men and women of her own age began to offend her. . . . Marriage itself became a kind of mystery to her, just as if she had still been a young girl."

On only two occasions does love brush her. When she is thirty, she meets a young wine merchant at a wedding. ". . . She felt a slight bruise on the left side of her heart and it seemed a shadow wheeled across her." In his eyes "she saw an empty darkness, an empty stage, the veils falling, falling. . . ." Bacchus to her Venus, he proposes elopement, calling her "the most unawakened woman" he has ever met. She flees him, going off instead with a safe, middleaged lecher. "I don't like trouble," she explains. "It gives me a disorderly feeling. This is just deviation. You can't get married with that feeling." Her second time she is about fifty-five and the man is her daughter's lover. He, too, resists the attraction. For Eleanor, real love would mean acceptance of mystery, spontaneity, and an intolerable loss of self in union with another. Again she decides that "never, never again must she see this intruder, this man, this god, this tyrant, who had begun to squeeze the life out of her." Like Lessing's *The Summer before the Dark*, Stead's novel culminates with the heroine's acceptance of herself as a post-sexual being. Eleanor feels she "had accepted life. She could rest." A cold wind blows in her brain. She finally understands that "I kept to the rules, but the rules didn't keep me," and her only solution is to continue to work.

Yet despite her denial, Eleanor's only real sense of herself is through her body: her small breasts, fine legs, smooth skin. In the opening scene she undresses before her girlfriends when she has a rash, and they discuss what men desire in women. In middle age she parades naked before her curtainless window, stroking herself and thinking, "What a pity! . . . The Golden Girl wasted!" Her only really devoted relationship comes late in her life to a septuagenarian pornographer. Because he believes that "love and pleasure were best in the imagination: nothing can disguise the crudity of ordinary sexual love," he has her do "classic poses" and "love portraits" amid props of sadism and religious eroticism. Unable to connect her physical and mental lives, trapped by her acceptance of cliché and social convention, she thus achieves fulfillment only as pure surface, as *tableau vivant*.

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Miss Herbert is a subtler fiction than at first appears, then, but it is still flat and foreshortened compared to much of Stead's earlier work. The style is often dull. As a young rewrite woman, Eleanor keeps a list of writing rules beginning "short sentences/ short paragraphs/ the simple, not the involved" and ending "SUM TOTAL: SUCCESS." Too often in the novel Stead follows her heroine's pat rules. This restraint is preferable to the florid excesses of her first two novels, but it drains the savor from her style. Like a soup sieve, it serves us polite broth while it removes the awkward, spicy lumps that flavored Stead's more compelling earlier books. Stead insisted that *The Man Who Loved Children* was not about women in general. In writing *Miss Herbert*, the half-alive housewife, as a woman's novel in good earnest, Stead paradoxically foregoes her sharpest talents.

Miss Herbert is neither terrible nor funny, and the best of Stead is both. Despite minor characters with names like Cope Pigsney, Lord Exitt, and Mallow Bounce the poetess, there is little satiric verve in the novel. If Eleanor is not heroine enough to warm our sympathies, her husband is not villain enough to fan our resentment. Stead is magnificent in her portraits of odious men, self-deceiving, self-satisfied monologuers and manipulators. Henry Charles is one of her dullest, both personally and politically. Perhaps because the novel's focus remains so steadily on Eleanor, we don't follow Henry's affairs. He steals no scenes, unlike *Letty Fox*'s Uncle Philip, who once gathers four women with packed valises ready to elope to Europe with him on the same boat. But Henry is merely a pathetic bounder, a pocket fascist, and a snob.

Stead's earlier work often assumes a socialist political perspective within which she satirizes false leftists. In *Miss Herbert*, the characters are genteel right wingers. Henry, a partly-Jewish Swiss, becomes an English citizen, a Tory and an Anglican; he won't tolerate his children playing with foreigners or Jews. When Eleanor lives in a slum, she discovers that "the agitators are all wrong, for these people do not want anything better." During the War she is sure "we are the first nation in the world," and later she gives some poor Communists charity and looks down at their improvidence: "Communism is a luxury for poor people."

The gravest disappointment of *Miss Herbert* in comparison to Stead's earlier work is not its narrow scope, however, but its negligence in drawing Eleanor's relationships with her parents and her children. Stead may now wish to move away from her masterpiece, *The Man Who Loved Children*, (1940, 1966)—from its personal intensity and its growing popularity—but it is still the first Stead novel one should read. It is a difficult, even a painful book. Several friends have told me that they kept laying it aside and picking it up, prevented from reading straight through by the book's intensity, its nightmarish recreation of the horrors of family life.

The Man Who Loved Children opens on a large Georgetown house full of children, animals, and mysteriously alienated parents. On "Sunday-Funday" Samuel Clemens Pollit presides over his domain, constantly entertaining his children with pets and pet jokes, dialect, nature lore, and baby talk. Samuel is a scientist and optimist. He regards himself as a model human and as the best of fathers. "Mother Earth," whispered Sam, "I love you, I love men and women, I love little children and all innocent things,

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I love, I feel I am love itself—how could I pick out a woman who would hate me so much!" His children are his joy and his purpose in life; he regards them dewy-eyed, though he thinks children have a different effect on women: "En if I had my way no crazy shemales would so much as git the vote! Becaze why? Becaze they is crazy! Becaze they know nuffin! Becaze if they ain't got childer, they need childer to keep 'em from goin' crazy; en if they have childer the childer drive em crazy." Instead, benevolently, he almost succeeds in driving his children crazy with his desire for narcissistic replication. He needs and creates for himself a troop of docile small backrubbers, lap snugglers, housepainters, lunch cookers, and fall guys for his practical jokes, a permanent audience. Unwilling to face reality, Sam smothers his family with his boundless ego. His complacent superiority in his virtue, his science, and his maleness—that is, his control of money and power—blankets their lives, just as the stench of boiling marlin oil from his disastrous last experiment permeates their house.

Henrietta Pollit had been a rich, idle girl. After ten years of marriage to widower Sam Pollit she has six children and many debts. She is "an old-fashioned woman," completely identified with her family and her house:

> Though she was a prisoner in it, she possessed it. She and it were her marriage. . . . Every room was a phial of revelation to be poured out some feverish night in the secret laboratories of her decisions, full of living cancers of insult, leprosies of disillusion, abscesses of grudge, gangrene of nevermore, quintan fevers of divorce, and all the proliferating miseries, the running sores and thick scabs, for which (and not for its heavenly joys) the flesh of marriage is so heavily veiled and conventually interned.

Henny cannot imagine life for herself outside of marriage and children. They are what women are for, and she repeatedly says she would rather kill her stepdaughter Louie than have her go through it. "Oh, God, when I think that whoever she is, she has to do what I have done, and know what I have known, and find out all the beastly lies. . . ." Unlike Eleanor Charles, she understands the hypocrisy and slavery of women's traditional role, but she doesn't believe there is any other choice for the financially-dependent woman. Her wedding ring means to her "an eyeless eternity of work and poverty and an early old age, it also meant that to her alone this potent breadwinner owed his money, name, and fidelity, to her, his kitchen-maid and body servant. For a moment, after years of scamping, she felt the dread power of wifehood; they were locked in each other's grasp till the end—the end, a mouthful of sunless muck-worms and grass roots stifling his blare of trumpets and her blasphemies against love."

We start the novel suspicious of the haggard Henrietta, a stepmother-witch who attempts to strangle her clumsy stepdaughter. As the novel progresses, our sympathy for her grows. Like Louie, we begin to understand her and to take her side in the battle between men and women. "Henny was one of those women who secretly sympathize with all women against all men; life was a rotten deal, with men holding all the aces." "Against the gay-hearted, generous, eloquent, goodfellow" the women form a creature made of "hate of woman the house-jailed and child-chained against the keycarrier, child-namer, and riot-haver." The intensity of the domestic warfare between the Pollits increases. The children understand their parents as eternal antagonists: "their father was the tables of the law, but their mother was natural law; Sam was household czar by divine right, but Henny was the czar's everlasting adversary, household anarchist by divine right." As the tension between the two becomes intolerable, Stead shifts her focus from the parents to the stepdaughter Louie, who shapes her own character, her genius, by withdrawing from the domestic holocaust around her into the solitude of a writer's imagination. Stead has said that the novel represents her own family, and its intensity is fueled by the passions of vengeance and escape.

Stead's finest-paced novel moves relentlessly to its conclusion like the novel of which it is a brilliant and ironic reworking, *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert ends his devastating portrait of French provincial life with the happy Homais surrounded by his children: "Across the square, cheerful and flourishing, the pharmacist's family grew. . . . Napoleon helped in the laboratory; Athalie embroidered a cap for him; Irma cut out paper tops to cover the jam jars. . . . He was the happiest of fathers, the most fortunate of men." Adulterous, extravagant Emma who poisoned herself with his arsenic is forgotten; her husband, dead; her daughter, working in a cotton mill. Stead conflates the figures of Homais and Charles into the naturalist Sam Pollit; like Homais, he bobs back to prosperity after other's disasters. Like Emma Bovary, Henrietta Pollit is trapped in debt and lies and abandoned by her lover. After making a desperate effort to extricate herself from her woes, she contemplates suicide. But she doesn't have the courage of her despair until Louie offers her tea poisoned with cyanide from scientist Sam's experiments. Henny dies exonerating Louie, "I can't stand it any more—she's not to blame, she's got guts, she was going to do it. . . ." Instead of wasting in a cotton mill, Louie leaves home. Only Henny is martyred, not as in Flaubert because her vice deserved death, but because her writer-stepdaughter could only grow by killing in her miserable stepmother the roles she must escape. Then, become her "own mother," she is free to take "a walk round the world."

* * *

The Man Who Loved Children is Stead's anatomy of private life; the *House of All Nations*, (1938, 1972) is her encyclopedia of high finance. The "house of all nations" is a small speculative French bank, Bertillon Frères, that attracts "the International of the Upper Ten Thousand." It is "a mercurial money crowd. . . . It flows, it registers the temperature, it never freezes." Stead lists one hundred twenty-five characters in her book. It is a man's world, with only a few wives and mistresses in the cast. The only significant woman is the ambitious wife of Aristide Raccamond; she pushes him to destroy the bank that has taken him in. The characters' private lives are irrelevant, hasty, undeveloped in the novel, like conversations in a gambling casino: all that matters is the turn of the wheel. The goddess money, like Fortuna, reigns imperturbably over depression-rocked Europe. Stead overwhelms us with her knowledge of this world, detailing elaborate schemes of chicanery and exchange. She uses to great advantage her years as a bank clerk and businesswoman in London and Europe, and she seems to take pride in differentiating the national types who inhabit the mansions of money. She discriminates the Alsatian from the German from the Hungarian Jew, for example, the Chilean from the Argentine playboy.

"No one ever made enough

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money," says Jules Bertillon, the young financial genius who heads the bank. He does not actually love money, but only his schemes for making it. A kind of innocent, he escapes our contempt for most of the other greedy and duplicitous characters. He understands money but not people; he does not try to gain power over them. He is therefore the most mythologized and loved of speculators. When his assistant Michel Alphendéry says he loves men, Jules replies, "That's a prejudice. . . . Most people don't get on because of some old prejudice. Drop them and have a couple of crazy superstitions like me: you'll make more money."

The myths around Jules survive even the collapse of his bank, but such myth-making is dangerous. It hides the simple, exploitative reality of capitalism. The morality-play named Adam Constant, bank-teller, communist, and poet, explains:

> I want to show the waste, the insane freaks of these money men, the cynicism and egotism of their life, the way they gambol amidst plates of gold. . . . I'll show that they are not brilliant, not romantic, not delightful, not intelligent; that they have no other object but their personal success and safety.

For Doris Lessing in her "Children of Violence" series, as for many twentieth-century authors, war is the shaping experience of modern sensibility. For Stead, the laws of capital determine human behavior. Ironically, the best servants of the rich and the only honest men in the bank are Marxists, Constant and Alphendéry. They know that the rich understand class struggle and that they work to keep things as they are. " 'Knowledge, money, real love, power,' [say the rich], 'are too good for the people. These things are divine, we must keep them all to ourselves.' And they debase learning, coinage, sex, democratic control to fool the people."

Stead's other nine novels, too, treat "knowledge, money, real love, power" and their debased shadows. Less comprehensive than her two major works, the other fictions show a rich development in her treatment of the permutations of the personal and the political, of inner and outer experience. Her first novel, *The Salzburg Tales*, (1934), was a new writer's ambitious sampler, overlush, sensational, filled with portents, ghost stories, and tales of incest. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, (1935), has chapter titles like an eighteenth-century novel: "A stirring sermon has no effect on an ill-fated hero." Its tone is unsure, rhapsodic, sometimes diffuse. Yet it takes people's daily labor seriously, and it gives us convincing dialogue from print shops and political meetings. The novel begins Stead's investigations of the warping power of poverty on human desires for beauty, love, and freedom. Stead's next novel, *The Beauties and Furies*, 1936, is better written, simpler, and better controlled than the first two books. In it a runaway English wife in Paris finds that romance and adultery are no improvement over marriage. Then, having produced a novel a year for three years, Stead completed her work of the 1930s with the *House of All Nations*. A parallel book, her smallest and easiest to read, is *The Little Hotel*, written in the 1940s but not published until 1973. Here a small Swiss *pension*, not a bank, is the microcosm of Europe, and its international set no longer controls money. Instead, it lives according

to the decorums of postwar investment regulations. Guests and hotel workers display the follies of society upstairs and downstairs in the style of great '30s movies like *Grand Illusion* and *Grand Hotel*.

If Stead's financial manipulators are sometimes innocents, her emotional manipulators are far worse, and they grow steadily more dangerous as her novels progress. Withers of *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* thrives on thrusting himself into other people's problems: "When he had irritated these friends in need, . . . made them restless with desire and disappointment, . . . he would go home and sleep softly." These egotists are so well-drawn that they may become unbearable. *A Little Tea, A Little Chat*, (1948), for example, is a virtuoso performance that is difficult to get through since its dominating character, Robert Grant, is so hateful that we want to kill him hundreds of pages before Stead gets around to it. A Wall Street speculator, Grant plays Volpone to a crowd of parasites, cheating women of their bodies and men of their money and work by his endless sob-stories and hollow promises. His sex life is the perfect mirror of his economics. For him, sex is a sub-category of property: "Property is a woman, remember," he tells his son. "Think of property every morning when you get up, otherwise she'll run around in the daytime, and talk to the butcher boy. . . . She's there to be stolen. Now I don't say woman to mean woman. A woman with property acts like a man." Shallow, predatory, hypocritical, vicious, Robert Grant becomes a symbol of American capitalism. As so often in Stead's fiction, a character becomes representative only after reaching a boundary of grotesque exaggeration that reveals the essence of its type.

Nellie Cook, Stead's only female emotional manipulator, is her most horrible, and the late novel *Dark Places of the Heart*, also called *Cotter's England*, (1966), in which she appears, is one of Stead's darkest, finest, and funniest. The tone is often like that of an Albee or Pinter play, for example in the scene in which repulsive old Uncle Simon prepares a tepid chicken because he is too cheap to heat the water to boiling. Nellie, one of Stead's separated wives who refuses to acknowledge her position, writes for a leftist newspaper and surrounds herself with women friends. At first she seems generous and sympathetic. Then we learn her obscene use of her friends' loneliness and misery. Crooning to her endlessly to "confess," to "introspect," and to "sacrifice," all for friendship, Nellie drives her friend Caroline to suicide.

While Nellie Cook and Sam Pollit thrive by invalidating other people, Stead does allow a few of her characters to escape the chains of family and of class and to achieve autonomy. Edward Massine of *The People with the Dogs*, (1951), Stead's gentlest novel, wakes from the somnolent rituals of his animal-loving extended family to assert himself as a passionate individual. Like *The People with the Dogs, Letty Fox, Her Luck*, (1946), is an American novel that ends with a wedding. Stead assures us that Letty Fox is typical: "The language and opinions are those of a type of

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middle-class New York office worker. The jokes and stories in Chapter XXVIII are not original but are taken from conversations heard in midtown Manhattan." Perhaps the mores of the time explain Letty's loose ways with her body and her money, but her childhood is typical only for a Stead heroine, not for an American typist. She is brought up away from both parents, boarded with an eccentric uncle in a farmhouse without doors, sent to Europe as a companion for a cousin who is the mistress of a rich businessman. She thinks she knows all about men but won't tell all about women. "Men don't like to think that we are just as they are. But we are much as they are; and therefore I have omitted the more wretched details of that close connection, that profound, wordless struggle that must go on in the relation between the sexes." Unlike Eleanor Brent, whose early promiscuity her own resembles, Letty is passionately engaged with her men and with the wider political issues of her time. She responds to the Spanish Civil War with her "good instincts": ". . . I had seen at least a bit of European political life and knew you have to keep on fighting for liberty, even in a revolution when you're on the right side." Letty is therefore entitled to both autonomy and commitment at last. She marries an old lover and is grateful. "This was the best bargain I could have got out of life, with my frowsy, lazy, and yet ignorant ways. . . . 'I will try to do something for others,' I thought, 'not fritter away my days,' . . . One can't make a great stir, but one can be on the side of the angels."

Teresa Hawkins of *For Love Alone,* (1944), Stead's most obviously autobiographical novel, comes to a fulfillment much like Letty's but from the opposite direction, from poverty, chastity, and obedience to authorities and to work. Her carrion mentor Jonathan Crow entices her to leave Australia and follow him to England, just as an experiment in male domination. Once Theresa arrives, he teases her with his perverse celibacy, and he scorns her love. Yet like Chaucer's pardoner, damned himself and meaning only ill, he leads her to salvation. His valueless invitation gives her the strength for four years of somnambulized starvation while she saves the money for her boat ticket. In England, like her author, she is warmed, fed, and restored to life by a mothering male. According to Barbara Baer, Stead claimed William Blake fell in love with her because he could "count her ribs." Blake supported Stead in her writing, in their politics, and in a marriage that was both open and equal. Similarly, Theresa's employer James Quick loves her and allows her to grow. She moves from the truth "property is everything" to "love is feared: it dissolves society." She begins to write. She realizes that women have "a power to achieve happiness" if they "began to love freely where love came to them."

"I *am thinking* I *am free,*" Teresa triumphs when she understands that the only law is to love. Because true loving is freedom and because it is so rare, Stead repeatedly turns our attention to the wide-windowed prisons of class and sex that hold us until we learn to escape them. Letty Fox ends her novel with a declaration of faith. "Perhaps I just love life. I certainly expose myself to it; and I'm accessible to it. . . . It's a question of getting through life, which is quite a siege, with some self-respect. . . . I was not always honest, but I had grit, pretty much; what else is there to it?" Eleanor Herbert fails, finally, because she does not have the courage or the accessibility to life which Christina Stead demands of herself and which, through her best fiction, she offers to us. —*Judith Kegan Gardiner*

An Ugly Joke: "Dead Babies"

Dead Babies, by Martin Amis. Knopf. $6.95

For a time I imagined that dead baby jokes were held universally (well, at least municipally) hilarious. But the stares they provoked when I introduced them as chitchat at a gallery opening suggested to me that such drollery appeals to a select species. Dead babies are to the perverse what an Adonis is to a pederast, a scratch to a poison ivy victim, morphine to a melancholiac.

It's hard to say what distinguishes the dead baby joke aficionado from the general humorist. Many an apparently normal person will titter remorselessly over Helen Keller jokes, but though they have a similar sadistic edge these are smalltime and adulterated compared with dead baby jokes. First, their subject defies the ridicule heaped on it: Helen Keller is a triumphant, not tragic, character in the so-called human drama. Furthermore, Helen Keller jokes have a visual (or aural, if her speech is being imitated) gimmick. For instance, by frantically splaying your fingers and clenching your fist you can simulate Helen Keller falling off a cliff; or a hand fumbling about behind one's head can signal someone talking behind Helen Keller's back.

In dead baby jokes the cruelty is less antic, more diffuse; the raconteur and the listener are neither let off the hook by the real-life dignity of the maligned nor distracted by any pantomimic flourish. Consider a typical dead baby joke: *What's the difference between a truckload of dead babies and a truckload of bowling balls? Answer: With bowling balls you can't use pitchforks.*

Brutal? Vomititious? Demented? You bet. Many people will not laugh at this joke. And yet the same people do smile at Little Moron jokes, popular in the '30s and still circulating in grammar schools today, which turn on a logic similar to that of dead baby jokes—minus of course, the vulgarity. The moron's misunderstandings are funny because we recognize their sources; his dumbness acquires a certain wisdom as it exposes ambiguities of language. *What did the Little Moron do when he was told he was dying? He moved to the living room.* We can't say for sure whether our dear dunderpate is wisely foolish or foolishly wise. Likewise dead baby jokes inhabit some gray region between the realistically sick and the sickly realistic. Do they bespeak a twisted view of life or a healthy attitude toward death?

What enables us to turn into a joking matter this freight clerk's appraisal of the properties of dead babies vs. bowling balls is the fact that the babies aren't real. Many dead baby connoisseurs never even visualize any corpses. In the afore-related joke, I see a garbage truck opening its jaws to disclose a mound of uniform, pudgy bodies, a Ronald Searle-like flock of babies instead of cats, and another truck yawning to reveal shiny black bowling balls stacked up like so many serried tonsils. At their most graphic, the babies are rather like irregulars scrapped by a careless and prolific doll

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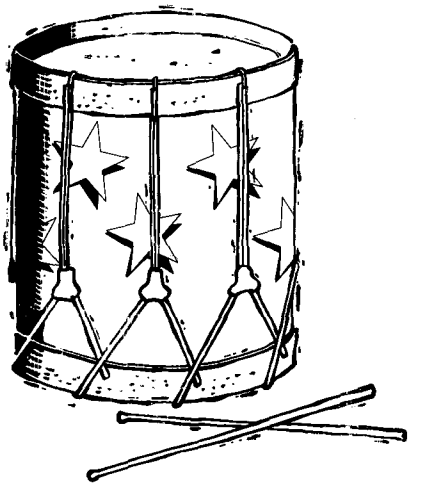
factory: you'd have to look pretty close to find the flaws that account for their demise. Dead babies can be humorous, it seems, because they are *ipso facto* an abstraction. They are, as a class, borderline. Christianity consigns them to the boundary of hell, limbo, because though they aren't responsible for their unbaptized, heathen state, they cannot be awarded salvation. No one would laugh at a joke about dead teen-agers, say, or dead recent college graduates, whose future could be extrapolated from a past. But dead babies have no history, past, present or future. I mean, these babies are entered on some birth certificate as Baby Girl Smith or Baby Boy Jones; they never made it out of the hospital.

Yet what could be fuller of pathos, more suggestive of opportunity deprived, potential wasted—in short, of the human condition—than dead babies? Unable to attach to them any particulars of growing up, learning and aging, we are forced to consider them in broader, impersonal terms. Dead babies encompass birth, death, sex and excrement—which just about cover everything. That "life," and by extension civilization, can be summed up in such a small lifeless mass is quite a grim thought. So it would seem that rather than cultists of cruelty, dead baby devotees are sophisticated pessimists with a worldview so informed with mortality that humor above all is not exempt from its irony.

See, in dead baby jokes as in life, nadir is a doggedly academic concept. No matter how godawful something is, you can always come up with something worse: *What's worse than a truckload of dead babies? A truckload of dead babies with a live one at the bottom*. Whereas such jokes are extremes of life's own examples of this truth (since they *begin* with the putative worst—dead babies—and degenerate from there), whole industries appealing to more catholic tastes have been founded on that assumption. Notable among them are the *National Enquirer*-type scandal sheets. The trick *there* is to make a middling atrocity—one which if reported in a more discreet publication would cause few sharp intakes of breath—into an egregious one by introducing the dead baby factor: Sex Scandal involving Ex-Tennis Pro and Dead Baby Uncovered. And then there are novels exploiting the technique with a little more finesse. *Dead Babies*, Martin Amis's definitive statement on the subject of the departed infant, appeared about a year ago and should be receiving its extreme unction on remainder tables at about this time.

* * *

Dead Babies is like a 206-page dead baby joke: an unutterably bad situation deteriorates. Martin Amis has fashioned a vision of society so sinister, so toxic and so repugnant that one would be hard put to elaborate on it. But Amis is his father Kingsley's son—Angry Young Man and virulent misanthrope—and so of course he does. The dead baby factor is the structural trump card of the novel, a device the author perfected in his first, equally nasty book, *The Rachel Papers*. There he would, with mock seriousness, employ some literary cliché and then undercut it with an acrid detail or two: "The hall smelled of boiling cabbage—or, let's be accurate, it smelled as if someone had eaten six bushels of asparagus, washed them



down with as many quarts of Guinness, and pissed over the walls, ceiling and floor."

In *Dead Babies* the conventions travestied are cultural instead of literary. The time, a little computation tips us off, is 1984, an era of anarchy more noisome, yet more familiar, than Orwell's Big Brotherism. Amis's 1984 has plainly evolved from our age of narcissism—what Tom Wolfe has called the Me Decade—in which tyranny of the individual endangers the welfare of the society. Ten members of the hip, moneyed, uninhibited and educated mid-twenties set have congregated at a rustic-genteel English country home for a weekend of occult drugs and heterodox sex. The action is confined to that three-day orgy, though we are allowed glimpses into the characters' present lives (some eight years earlier than the novel's time); the more-youthful-than-thou step-parents, deranged alcoholic mothers, homicidal fathers, and nameless gigolos of their puberty are but homespun neurotics compared with our functionally psychopathic protagonists.

The cast is indeed a pageant of dying babies. "Fetal and taciturn," Andy Adorno is afflicted with "false memories"—drug-related recall of incidents that never happened—about his upper-class doctor father. Andy was in fact born of and abandoned by hippie parents and took his name (and perhaps his identity as a musician) from the Marxist philosopher, T. W. Adorno. Keith Whitehead, the group whipping boy, is a corpulent dwarf given to flatulence, sudden evacuations and involuntary emissions. He affects normality (or adulthood) by hoisting himself onto nail-infested platform boots, which, when doffed, have to be swathed "in dead towels" in order to stifle the stench. Skip, a severely "touched" American, is raped by his father, who murders his mother. Giles Coldstream, ever his mama's Baby Giles, is morbidly obsessed with his teeth and has unpicturesque nightmares about breaking or losing them. Freud might have diagnosed this as castration anxiety. And according to South American folklore, such dreams foretell either personal misfortune or loss of a relative—possibilities which keep Giles in his mother's clutches: Losing his teeth would make Giles a toothless babe, once again prey to his mother's warping caprices, and yet as an adult he is manipulated by her frequent threats to call it a life.

All the characters are candidates for infanticide. In ancient cultures any of the following qualified a baby for extinction: illegitimacy, deformity, unfit parentage, and teeth. (Considered charmed in some societies, in most, babies born with teeth were regarded as damned and dangerous and so were often eliminated.)

* * *

What lends some plausibility to this bestiary is the presence of Quentin Villiers, the bacchanalia's fetching host and the fulcrum of all its social, sexual and emotional seesawing. Quentin (and his tractable wife Celia) is the only one in the book who professes belief in values that have no currency with the 1984 generation; these are referred to throughout as "dead babies," approximated in today's parlance by

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"bullshit," though the former has more restricted usage. Marvell Buzardt, a "small, owlish American, postgraduate in psychology, anthropology, and environment at Columbia University, underground journalist, filmmaker, and pop-cultural entrepreneur," is the arbiter of the dead baby ethic. "Fuck all this dead babies about love, understanding, compassion," he urges. Or to someone who has just admitted a tolerance for anti-violence: "I can't believe I'm hearing this babies. What are you, a fuckin' flower child?" Romantic love, religion, morality—anything that can't be reduced to a chemical equation falls under the rubric of dead babies.

As one who thrives on these discarded principles, Quentin is our last hold-out for old-fashioned virtue. So it is critical when he abruptly joins the dead baby cult as the weekend gets officially underway. Marvell has taken charge of dispensing the drugs, the proper dosage of which will relieve the users of their fiercest anxieties—as if psychological or physical defects can be remedied as easily as a soiled diaper or a rumbling stomach. Keith asks to be made tall, Giles wants to feel dentally invulnerable, and Quentin wants to regress: "As a profoundly cultivated and therefore profoundly unspontaneous creature I thought it might be interesting if I were shorn of these—my reflexes, my stock responses—so as to become, as it were, socially unclothed." After Quentin, their anchor in "society," is dislodged, the characters are set adrift in the bassinet of their solipsism. To withdraw any further from life-as-you-and-I-know-it would mean . . . you got it.

In Amis's *Götzendämmerung* automated cadavers masquerade as the living. Sex is a necrophilial impulse suited to spawn dead babies, a hideous mockery of procreation. Maturity of the genitals isn't prerequisite for copulation, so dissociated is sex from reproduction: "They're blowing each other in the fuckin' playpens over there," one character remarks. The social usefulness of sex has been obscured along with its biological function. Since "family" is a byzantine throwback, love as a concomitant of coitus perishes the same as monogamy. Marvell complains, "Christ, Quentin, you trying to reinstitute sex angst, or what? You know who you sound like? Fuckin' D. H. Lawrence. 'Sexual emotions'—fuck them. Sex is something your body does, like eating or shitting." Or burping or drooling.

So the improbable postures the sex players assume are purely recreational. Only Quentin and Celia, married and in love, have your basic sexual intercourse. The three Americans, Skip, Marvell and the pneumatic Roxanne, constitute a "troy," or threesome, devoted to ingenious manipulation of the orifices and crucial limbs. The bodacious Andy Adorno is well-endowed but impotent, a frequent martyr to "canceled sex." Keith settles for photo-inspired onanism. Anal rape, "mouth fucks," and digital assaults abound, though genital-to-genital contact is rare, and all the contortion and *frottage* is about as charged as the "fuck offs" and "the fucks" that casually dignify the characters' speech.

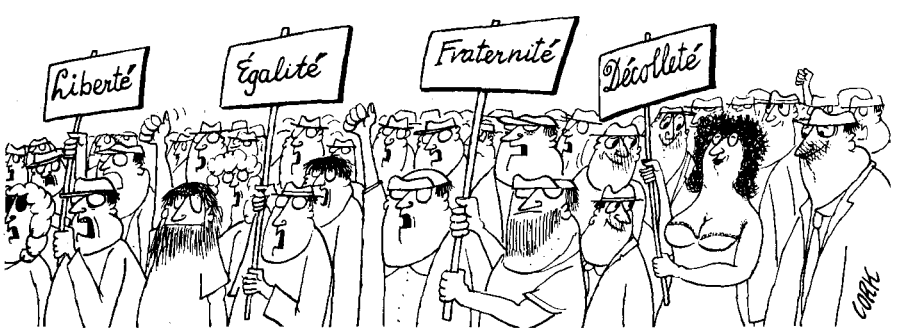
Appropriately, given infantile fascination with feces, the characters' libidinal energy is mostly anal. No distinction is made between genital and anal eroticism, and likewise bodily fluids are undifferentiated, their biological significance unremarked. Birth, excretion, bowel movement—all acts of expulsion are regarded uniformly: *inter faeces et urinam nascimur*. Advertising their incontinence, Marvell and Skip trundle about in filthy underpants, Giles nurses bottles of gin, and Andy has spontaneous erections.

Marvell provides the credo of dead baby sex: "We agree, don't we, that sex isn't erotic any more. It's carnal—conceptualized—to do with geometrics and sensations? . . . And that perversion is justified—no *demanded*—by an environment that is now totally man-made, totally without biology?" Futuristic it isn't. Amis reminds us in his epigraph that the satirist's "subject is not tomorrow . . . it is today." In this era of controlled birth and postponed conception, sex has become merely an expression of personal preference, and deviation a term harder and harder to define. The exotic couplings described in *Dead Babies* seem reasonable if only because they take place between consenting adults—or, more accurately, consenting infants.

The punch line of Amis's joke feeds on a traditional source of mirth in literature: fecal matter. But whereas scatology provided comedy in Swift and in picaresque works like *Simplicius Simplicissimus* and Celine's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, in *Dead Babies* it has become merely a cheerless metaphor for civilization. Excrement is a fetish with the characters of the novel, who exhibit a surpassing interest in their own and each others' stools. Defunct is the human enterprise whose currency is money, sublimated "turds" that adults can horde and fondle with impunity. The dead baby society has never progressed beyond the anal stage, and civilization has halted at peristalsis, producing only feces. Excrement is also the substance we give back to nature to replace what we took from it; it stands for life cycles. In our 1984 culture, the cash and the fertilizer are dead shit, refuse of the final evacuation.

So when we get to joshing, we dead baby comedians are really only broadcasting our resignation to arrested history and moribund nature. And all along you thought we were making crude cracks about infant mortality.

—Diane McWhorter



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SYNECDOCHE

Brief Poetry Notices

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ = Remarkable ☆ ☆ = Average

☆ ☆ ☆ = Fine Work ☆ = Dull Stuff

The Private Life, by Lisel Mueller. Louisiana State. $3.50.

☆ ☆ ☆

In this, the 1975 Lamont Poetry Selection published in 1976, the title is deliberate irony. Mueller is concerned with the convergences and divergences of our public and private selves and with the life and anti-life resulting. Varied in subjects and forms, the book gives us some of the more accomplished poems of recent years which confront these dichotomies head-on.

Often in Different Landscapes, by Leon Stokesbury. Texas. $8.95

☆ ☆

A first book with an unfortunate tonal handicap; Stokesbury thinks he's comic, but it's just that he hasn't gotten over the realization that it's possible to put one's childhood into language. His serious, adult, poems are promising. The book is decorated with photographs, by Frank Armstrong, but if they helped drive up the price, perhaps they could have been omitted.

Turns, by John Matthias. Swallow. $6.95.

☆ ☆ ☆

A fascinating and frustrating second book by one of the most knowledgeable commentators on contemporary British poetry which sounds rather—English. Lowellian poems connecting autobiography and history stand side-by-side here with fragments, discursive and anecdotal experiments and rootings in present consciousness, some trivial, some not. This is a risky, not altogether successful book that is well worth reading.

New Collected Poems, by Robert Graves. Doubleday. $10.00

☆ ☆ ½

Yet another collection (the sixth?) from this grand old man spread thin. Graves seems with his love poems a kind of latter-day Pushkin—and he is good at them, as good as ever. With a prissy but perhaps useful preface by James McKinley.

Ladder of the World's Joy, by Sarah Appleton. Doubleday $4.95 (paper)

☆ ½

The reader who gets past the annoyance of holding a book as if it were a scroll will find an extended sequence of philosophical chitchat taking place inside the author's head. Meditations, rhetorical questions, spiritual posturing against the universe. Plato was right.

The Hocus-Pocus of the Universe, by Laura Gilpin. Doubleday. $4.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ½

One of those first books that makes you sorry nobody reads poetry anymore. The poems here are understated but true, dealing with relationships and discoveries worth talking about. The 1976 Walt Whitman Award winner.

Selected Poems, by Lucien Stryk. Swallow. $8.95

☆ ☆ ☆

Almost complete enough to be called *Collected*, this volume shows Stryk at his best—when his tough mind tempers the delicacy of a number of Oriental influences—and his worst—when the amalgam fails. The voice is all-in-all attractive—in control of the language and seeming to regret it.

The Compass Flower, by W. S. Merwin. Atheneum. $4.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Still our finest poet, still the poet whose voice says the best of American poetry. It's difficult to say if Merwin grows stronger with each collection, or if he has simply reached the comfortable height of his powers.

Wit's End, by Joseph Di Prisco. Missouri. $6.50

☆ ☆ ½

Di Prisco writes skillful poems, rather improvisational even when they deal with personal matters. Despite his title, he does not seem very interested in surrendering to language-as-invention or in transcending felicitousness.

The Names of the Lost, by Philip Levine. Atheneum. $3.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Levine's empathy for others takes his poetry into countries usually reserved for the less egocentric genres, and the concentration, the musical enjambments of his verse, raise these poems to the pitch of sustained incantations.

Ariana Olisvos, Her Last Works and Days, by David Dwyer. Massachusetts. $4.95 (paper)

☆

Another invented persona—this time a 92-year-old woman with her roots in real history. The magazine *Aphra* noted that "with the whole world open to him, we find [the poet's] fraudulent entry into our [feminist] enclave morally and politically offensive and artistically distasteful," after it had published two of the poems it thought were *by* Olisvos. That *is* a bit thick of Dwyer, and the poems never much rise above the device of old-womanhood. Winner of the 1976 Juniper Prize.

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The Zodiac, by James Dickey. Doubleday. $6.00.

☆ ☆ ½

Hard as he struggles, Dickey can't bring off this book-long poem based on bits of poetry by the Dutch sailor Hendrik Marsam. There is the apparatus for a significant long poem here but not the vision. Dickey finally surrenders to spinning images in, alas, too-small circles.

Cumberland Station, by Dave Smith. Illinois. $3.45 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ½

A dynamic volume by a poet who, with this, his fourth book, has now discovered his real sources in land and family and learned to channel the currents of his individual voice.

Dialogue with a Dead Man, by Jim Miller. Georgia. $3.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ½

Poems so perfectly proportioned, so competent rhythmically and rhetorically that they delimit their own possibilities, fill this book which does offer genuine feeling toward the rural south. Apparently "naked poetry" is still buttoned up in Carter country.

Claiming Kin, by Ellen Bryant Voigt. Wesleyan. $3.45 (Paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ½

Beautifully crafted poems whose womanly speaker traces her relationship to the human and natural world time present and time past. Voigt's point of view is female, not feminist, her insights are those of acumen, not angst.

Room to Breathe, by David Clewell. Pentagram. $3.00 (paper)

☆ ☆

Clewell, alas, has a tendency to undercut the delicacy of his ideas by overextending metaphors and, worse, puts a lot of stock in sophomoric attempts at being funny. That said, one has to remember this is a first book, and even poets learn something from getting older.

Griffon, by Stephen Dobyns. Atheneum. $4.95.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The surreal is real, the dream an awakening in these wise and witty poems which alternately—sometimes simultaneously—terrify and amuse. Dobyns is Kafkaesque but very much his own man.

Hush, by David St. John. Houghton Mifflin. $3.95.

☆ ☆ ☆

Accomplished and reverent poems with a Rilkean tenderness for things and their sheer *beingness* grace the second selection in the Houghton Mifflin New Poetry Series. St. John's speaker is unusually modest; his talent is not.

Shaken by Leaf-Fall, by James Hearst. Kylix. $5.95

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

It will someday come as a revelation to the Literary Establishment that Hearst has been one of the four or five best poets of America in the 20th century. That day will come when we stop thinking of poems as high-class Scrabble games, and when we finally realize what technology has slickered us out of. Meanwhile the poet, now in his late seventies, rides on, prolific and honest as imagination knows.

Familiar Poems, Annotated, by Isaac Asimov. Doubleday. $7.95

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

What Asimov does to 37 introduction-to-poetry chestnuts ought *not* to be done, no doubt. Still, one should never turn his back on the opportunity to learn about the factual world, and Asimov's gloss of historical, biographical, political, philosophical and technological allusions is enormously satisfying. Highly recommended for teachers of literature, who frequently don't know much about anything.

The Freeing of the Dust, by Denise Levertov. New Directions. $2.25 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆

Language surrenders to outrage in Levertov's poems about the war in Vietnam, but the honest yet not confessional verses on living alone point a new direction (no pun intended) in the canon of her work.

Keeping Time, by Judith Moffett. Louisiana State. $3.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ½

A good bit of religiosity informs many of the poems here, and to its credit it feels sincere. Moffett seems frequently to feel that syntactical inversions can pass for art, but many of her lyrics surpass such creative writing gimmickry.

Maria, by Maria Ingram. Red Clay Books. (Paper, unpriced)

☆ ☆ ☆

A pleasant, straightforward collection whose settings are chiefly Southern, but whose interests are without boundary. Best of all, one can even enjoy a sense of humor in Ingram's work. A treat; most poets think to be funny means to be obscene.

The Prose Poem, edited by Michael Benedikt. Dell. $2.50 (paper)

☆ ☆ ½

If there *is* such a thing as a prose poem, it's well-represented here.

Gathering the Tribes, by Carolyn Forché. Yale. $1.95 (paper)

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The Yale Younger Poets Selection for 1975, published in 1976. There is no folderol in these tough-minded poems grounded in physical fact and compelling an almost kinetic response from the reader. Since it went whole heartedly co-ed several years back, the Yale Series has looked better and better.

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Lawrence Sturhahn

Stars and Other Magnitudes

In January when this is written some kind of nemesis is what I see and hear this winter as. That in western New York State they've had one hundred and thirty-nine inches of snow so far, and some place in Ohio the temperature hasn't been above freezing since Christmas. Closed factories, their workers laid off, now the power companies are reducing service to people's homes yet. In Chicago the automobile club is swamped with calls; in Birmingham who knows how to drive on ice? so cars slide around majestically like curling stones, crashing into one another; the rental fleets at airports, if not buried under drifts, are immobile with dead batteries, congealed oil in their engine blocks.

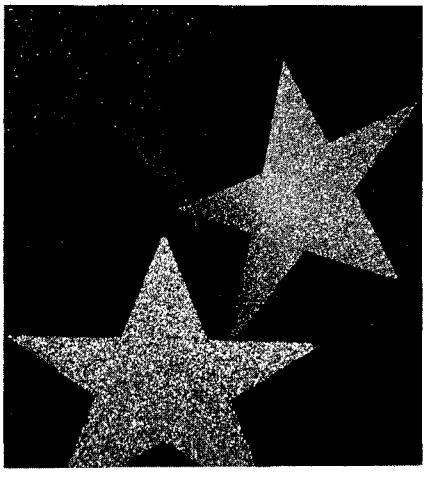
East of the Rocky Mountains with the country in this icy grip, choked with snow, in the spring the floods will be horrific. West of the Sierras, as the drought continues, stringent rationing of water is in the offing: forty-five gallons a day for the house; only flush the toilet twice; one each load of laundry for each inhabitant for the week. We will come to being dirty—modifying slightly what they used to say in poker—now that the cards are down. And the deal in the coming year for motion pictures doesn't look too promising either.

STORM CLOUDS FORMING
FOR FILM BIZ

That's the *Variety* headline for January 6, 1977.

* * *

It is said that history repeats itself, and from this cyclical pattern—perhaps—something is to be learned. At the San Francisco Film Festival this past November a number of films were concerned directly or indirectly with history, most particularly and specifically the documentary "Hollywood on Trial," directed by David Helpern, Jr., and written by Arnold Reisman. That film's form is a dramatic re-creation, through old newsreels and contemporary photographed interviews, of the shameful period in Hollywood's history when the House Un-American Activities Committee berated and exploited the industry in search of communists, who were ostensibly subverting an innocent domestic audience. The dates were 1947 - 1951, and the process ruined the careers of close to two hundred people—writers, actors, directors, technicians. The two film makers stated that their interest in the material stemmed, at least in part, from their own points of view toward history. Helpern had analyzed his political commitments from the turmoil of the '60s. And Reisman, from his experience as a teacher in the '70s, found out that his students' knowledge of the '50s was summed up by having something to do with Rock & Roll.



Examining that period of thirty years ago, it's interesting to find that many of the problems listed by *Variety* as part of the coming storm today are analogous to the situation in the industry after World War II and into the '50s. With the impact of television the film-going audience was shrinking. Fewer pictures were being made, and there was stiffer competition from the European industry, then reviving after the war. The traditional studio organization was breaking up. On one level the collusion between the leadership of the industry and the witch hunting HUAC can be seen as finding scapegoats on which to load the problems, and displace their own fear.

* * *

Film festivals are interesting to film freaks not only because they present, in a kind of marathon of seeing, a plethora of films from many places, many of which don't go into general release (which is another problem that the industry worries like a dog at a chemically treated intractable bone), but also for presenting retrospectives of particular individuals' works over a period of years.

Recently described as over-the-hill (along with Gregory Peck and Robert Mitchum) Burt Lancaster was at the festival with clips from fifteen of his films, starting with "I Walk Alone" in 1947 and ending with Altman's "Buffalo Bill and the Indians" made in 1976. Included were such exotica as "The Flame and the Arrow" (1950), "From Here to Eternity" (1953), "The Sweet Smell of Success" (1957), "Judgement at Nuremberg" (1961). And these are only choices of a choice series, the whole a list of salient and diverse American films, most of them memorable for one reason or another, if only—and at least—how they mark the passage of time with a certain excellence.

Included was a sequence from Visconti's "The Leopard," a reminder that Lancaster's work has not been exclusively American. And part of the time on stage at the Palace of Fine Arts he talked of Bertolucci's epic "1900." Originally seven hours in length, and then subject to a major hassle about release in this country, now—I understand—the film is cut down (unfortunately) to four hours and will be able to be seen.

One of the great directors on the contemporary scene, Bernardo Bertolucci has always had history as a theme in his work—the magnificent "Last Tango in Paris" is about history too! According to Lancaster the idea was to do "a history, fictionalized—but nevertheless a history of Italy from the year 1900 to the year 1945, starting with the wars between the

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peasants, living virtually under a feudal system, and the rich landowners; continuing through the beginnings of fascism, the second World War, and the growth of communism." The film was made near Parma, the director's home; in it Lancaster plays a patriarch landowner (and Sterling Hayden the patriarch peasant) to both of whom in 1900 is born a grandson. Seen through the boys' eyes, the ensuing forty-five years of society and politics are infused and informed by the polarities of their positions.

One leg of the American industry has always been the star system, and a question about that is often raised. It was (and still is), so it's said, the personality that brings the patron into the theatre, but a view of thirty years of one actor's work offers a point of view to that. Watching Lancaster, what impressed me was his command of his craft. If it was one face under different make-ups, there were different nuances in the roles he played. And then, there he was on the stage, a grizzled lean man, gesticulating dynamically. Too impetuous to sit in the chair, he stood up to talk with the audience, and bit off each word clearly.

In its so-called halcyon era, pre World War II, movies were made in one or another of the major studios. It was a kind of mass production system, by which I don't mean, necessarily, to denigrate the product. It was after the war the system started to break down, when Lancaster started his career. On a basketball scholarship at NYU in 1934, "I became enamored of the gymnastic work I was doing, and at the end of sophomore year, literally ran off to join a circus." Spending the war in a special services unit, after it he had a role in a Broadway play called "A Sound of Hunting," which only ran for three weeks. But out of it he was called to do a screen test in Hollywood, and Mark Hellinger—now dead—saw the test and cast him in "The Killers." He was on his way, starting out as the era of the major studio dominance was ending. The company eventually formed with his agent, Harold Hecht, was one of the first independents. And, along with the rise of United Artists, it presaged a new era for the industry, one that continues—more or less—to this day.

Lancaster explained that Hecht had long wanted to produce, so they talked of making their own films from the beginning. But at that point the old system was still entrenched enough for it to be impossible. The studios had contracts for writers, directors, actors, and the decisions about what films who would do were sent down from the front offices, a producer from the studio roster assigned to supervise the project's completion. The more important an individual was the more say he or she might have, and projects could be refused up to a certain point—when suspensions were invoked and salaries withheld. There was, as one might suspect, a lot of internecine strife, a lot of accusations of tyranny, and, perhaps, a certain mechanical stamp on the pictures produced. Besides, at the time, HUAC was beating the bushes and everything had to be kept clean.

In the system there was certainly a lot of fear, little room for innovation. And although Lancaster and Hecht (and others) tried to make deals, offered services in studio projects in return for studio financing and a share in the return of the independent's project, it was not possible until 1949 when Jack Warner was persuaded to make that trade. Six films were the result, three for Warner Brothers and three for Hecht and Lancaster, two of which were the successful "Crimson Pirate" and "The Flame and the Arrow."

Overhead, charged by the major for the use of its facilities, was also a problem, however. For instance "The Crimson Pirate"—costing one million to make—had charged to it another fifty percent as overhead, so before any profit was realized a total of one million, five hundred thousand had to be paid back. But about that time, the two lawyers, Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin, took over United Artists and their M.O. was to say, make the film for us, you do it, you be responsible, all you guarantee is the date of delivery.

Hecht and Lancaster made two of the early films under this aegis. One, "Apache," cost nine hundred thousand and grossed six million; the other, with Gary Cooper, "Vera Cruz," costing one million-seven, grossed eleven million. Thus was a new system born: independent companies releasing through organizations not affiliated with the majors.

* * *

When he sashays on the stage the moderator says, "he needs no introduction." I overhear one lady: "Ohhh, he has such a nice smile!" Foxy is what I would call him, his black shirt open at the neck, the collar outside the lapels of his black jacket. Jack Nicholson is a *Superstar*.

He, and eight others, if not exerting direct control, certainly define something about what the movie business is and what kind of films are available to see. Having any of the nine in a package (script-director-star) the probability is

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that you can walk in anyplace and get a deal to do it. They say (some do) there's a formula, that it can be worked out mechanically on the pocket calculator that movie moguls carry now in the side pocket of their black suit jackets. Put down the million plus he costs, and add what other small things you need (like a camera, a director, raw stock, and a few grips). Then multiply what you think will be the film rentals from the distributor (whose concern is the box-office, the receipts from the exhibitors' theatres), considering that one of the nine is playing in your pix. That first cost figure, one million, right? That's not so much, and we all know about it—that things cost more these days.

The secret of Nicholson's technique is detail, which is the secret of all craft. The color or smell or feel of something creates a reality for the patron of any art. The more detail there is the more chance for it to push more buttons in the individual consciousness. Like a parody of ourselves is the way Jack Nicholson talks, his sentences unfinished, elliptical, and intermittent. When he came to Hollywood he worked in a Roger Corman picture. Low budget, quick and dirty, is what that means. But it's a viable organization (New World Pictures), and a genre ("Little Shop of Horrors"—Nicholson's second picture—and other titles like "Crash Car, Crash!"). Corman's pictures have been fertile ground for film hopefuls' seed—Francis Ford Coppola started there. "Just out from New Jersey," Nicholson said, "I didn't know the difference in a movie shot in three months or one shot in six days."

Don't be fooled by this self deprecating, familiarity breeding act/reality; it's charming (going with his smile) when he says before he was an actor he was a "ahh—life guard" (slurring the words is part of the technique). Remember that the man studied the craft for ten or twelve years, and he's admitting that. He studied with, and is friend to, Bruce Dern, another master craftsman who is not yet a *Superstar*. Nicholson would like it if he was, for then he would have more choice about the material he was in. He wouldn't have to *take* something . . . the shadowy presence of what Lancaster described from the old days, the tyranny of the studios, the tyranny of money. It changes, but it doesn't change: that's the paradox which is so hard, which nobody ever taught us to understand.

The films of his that Nicholson has liked best are the ones that have not been so commercially successful. Like "King of Marvin Gardens" directed by Bob Rafelson (an interesting maverick whose most recent "Stay Hungry" is, like many of his films, getting good critical notices and doing poor business). Like Nicholson's own directorial effort, "Drive He Said," a real movie about the '60s, colleges, chaos, and commitment, which didn't do very good business either. "Everything you do," he said, "is eighty-five percent you anyway." That's a point to shoot for, indeed, and Nicholson makes it now more often than not. I wonder how many of the rest of us do, and how much of the time we come up craps.

Nicholson did Antonioni's "The Passenger"—an ambiguous exercise (albeit for certain people of particular visions—me!—a triumphant experience), the theme and metaphor of which is a blind man who has paid his dues, thrown his dice, having wondered for so many years what sight was like. Choosing to see (by becoming a dead man), he then finds the reality less than his own romantic expectation, begins to dwell in dark rooms, and finally deals himself his own *aces and eights*, the dead man's full house. Who didn't hear the sound of the shot as the last long slow zoom of "The Passenger" ended the trip.

Antonioni liked him. "I was one actor he could get along with," Nicholson said, and they plan another movie. "I want to do a comedy with him," he said—and when the audience laughs—"ahh, no—I'm serious. Because, in his own quiet way, he is a very, very funny man."

Speaking of his technique, and of working with Brando (another of the nine), he relates it to how you feel about the job, the way that he works in a role, "the kind of craft an actor works behind," attacking the material. "If you take a big leap into something—(taking risk is what he means)—and something doesn't work out, there should be someone there to find a way of working it out." The director—or the producer, if he sees it and knows enough—or maybe the editor who finally cuts the film together.

"It's a matter of testing your nerve; acting is about getting pressure off yourself." And he likes working in films because you don't get to ride a horse in the theatre. He loves to play cowboy, and I hear that in his voice. "A grown man can't do that, but here they pay you for it." I like that, the strong child-like force (from wherever it comes, fantasy, dream, or memory), out of which comes all good creative effort, acting or painting or writing or whatever . . . . And part of it is having fun with it, being capable of laughing at yourself.

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Somebody from the audience asked him if there was a duet that he sang with Barbra Streisand that was cut out of "On A Clear Day"—and what was it like working with her? "The whole job was difficult for me, actually," he answers. "I took it because one of the things about acting (read *life*), and this, for instance, falls into the category, is you have to do things in order to say, 'why am I doing this?' It tests your nerve."

Going on, he describes starting out on a theatre stage, how he always had a big "opening night sweat," and that he still doesn't like the feeling at all. But, he repeated, "it tests your nerve. And standing up with Barbra Streisand to sing a duet in front of thirty grips, hammers hanging off them, looking at you, one saying, 'Geez! I seen Dick Powell—this is tragic . . . what's happened to the business?' I took that as a challenge and felt good when it was over, didn't have to accept any more challenges for about a year."

He spoke about his feeling about films (in contrast to the theatre), "that the form is less rigid, the behavior less ritualistic, and the standard broader. In films—which I still think is true—there's always room for someone who can do a job and hold people's attention, tell a story and not make them sorry they went to the movies that night."

* * *

That actors like Nicholson get such astronomical fees (along with, usually, a little piece of the action) for the films they are in is one of the things that some people in Hollywood worry at. It, and inflation, and rising labor and material costs, have made the movies cost more and more. (And that's not to forget the distribution, prints and advertising, which can cost just as much or more, and are on top of the negative cost.) Ironically, or so it seems at first look, it has come to pass that there's a better risk involved in making a multi-million dollar movie than a million dollar movie because the rate of return—from that million dollar actor who is going to draw the crowd—is more likely to be in the multi-millions too.

Bigger and bigger, more spectacle, more blood—and fewer films overall. Theatres were closed last year for lack of what the theatre owners refer to as *product*. (Or at least, that's what they say—while others say it was just a matter of a lot of terrible films). And still others opine that the audience, hard won in the banner year of 1975 (when the box office was bigger than any year since 1946—after which it went down into the dismal years when fear and the blacklist flourished), lost the movie-going habit because of lack of films. Unless you like BLOCKBUSTER FAIRY TALES you stay home and get your entertainment from the television.

* * *

Dyan Cannon sweeps onto the stage, groaning with pleasure at the applause, crying out under it, "you really know how to make a person feel nice." A tall woman in a flowing white overgown with brocade edging, blond hair down to the middle of her back, calling out: "Thank you! Thank You!"

Earlier, I heard, she was walking around backstage, holding her head, and looking for ice. There had been a noon program that day and it let out at two or so. When she saw the audience leaving the theatre she called out, "All those people could see my film!" So they

ran "Number One" the first time, and then again when it had been scheduled originally.

If "Marathon Man" cost X millions and who knows how many months to shoot, and presses all the violence, blood, and fear buttons, then "Number One" shot in six days and started with one thousand dollar grant from the American Film Institute presses the Kid-sex button. Also, of course, that one grand is not the real story since the picture got finished with a lot of volunteer help from Ms. Cannon's highly professional friends (and who would not want to be her friend?), including ten grand's worth of editing machines and time donated by Warner Brothers.

"Number One" (with obvious connotations in the argot) is about two little girls (it was autobiographical, she said) who start off to the school lavatory and end up investigating the boys room where they meet two of them, and start playing a benign game of "I'll Show You Mine if You'll Show Me Yours." At that point they are chanced upon by the vice-principal who is from the old school—and fun and laughter goes quickly from the scene. Unfortunately, after the adults enter the action, for me the film falls apart. All the adults—because later, at home, the miscreants are handled by their parents—become case book characters, each evincing a classic parent problem. Nevertheless, it is an unusual film about a common occurrence, and by themselves the children ring absolutely real. It is also, as she said, a creative fulfillment for its maker. (There are, incidentally, no women among the nine.)

* * *

'76 SECOND BEST DOMESTIC B.O. YEAR

That's the *Variety* headline on January 19, 1977. Only six percent below the 1975 record, "a year-end domestic theatrical boxoffice explosion could not make up for the earlier b.o. erosion last year, but 1976 ended up as the second best year in the history of the motion picture business.

"Until 1974, the film business could only look back to the pre-tv, pre-leisure time bonanza year of 1946, when domestic boxoffice receipts set a record one billion, six hundred and ninety-two million. A quarter century of industry decline followed, until in 1974 domestic b.o. total passed that ancient highwater mark to reach about one billion, seven hundred and twenty-five million. All these numbers include *inflation effects*." (Italics mine)

But then it goes on to note those effects, that a theatre ticket in 1946 dollars is now worth less than twenty-three cents. "It's important," the article says (indeed), "to keep that in perspective."

So much for history and cycles and what they teach. It's good to have some money in the bank after a good year if you got to go into a stormy season. And maybe some of that will get diverted to northern California—we could use the rain. □

KENNETH LASH, STEPHEN MINOT, & LAWRENCE STURHAHN are familiar names in the NAR. JUDITH KEGAN GARDINER teaches at Chicago Circle. DIANE McWHORTER is connected with The Boston Phoenix.

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"I really didn't enjoy it."

—Janet Brown, Brookline, MA

"I enjoyed it immensely. There is something of a sensibility akin to Grace Paley's at times. The authority of the prose is extraordinary."

—Arnold Krupat, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville

"I find it fascinating."

—Len Webster, West Midlands, England

"Personally, I can say that I could have written half of your book, not because I have your talent, but only because I feel, think and believe almost everything you have put into words so beautifully."

—Ginette Cassara, New York

"I was captivated."

—Edith Fels, Philadelphia

"Only thing I objected to was the difficulty I had keeping the haphazardly introduced characters straight. But even here some came out beautifully developed. All in all, I must admit you are a writer of considerable talent."

—Morris K. Jacobson, Rockaway, NY

"Its intricate structure and delicate texture made rigorous and delightful reading."

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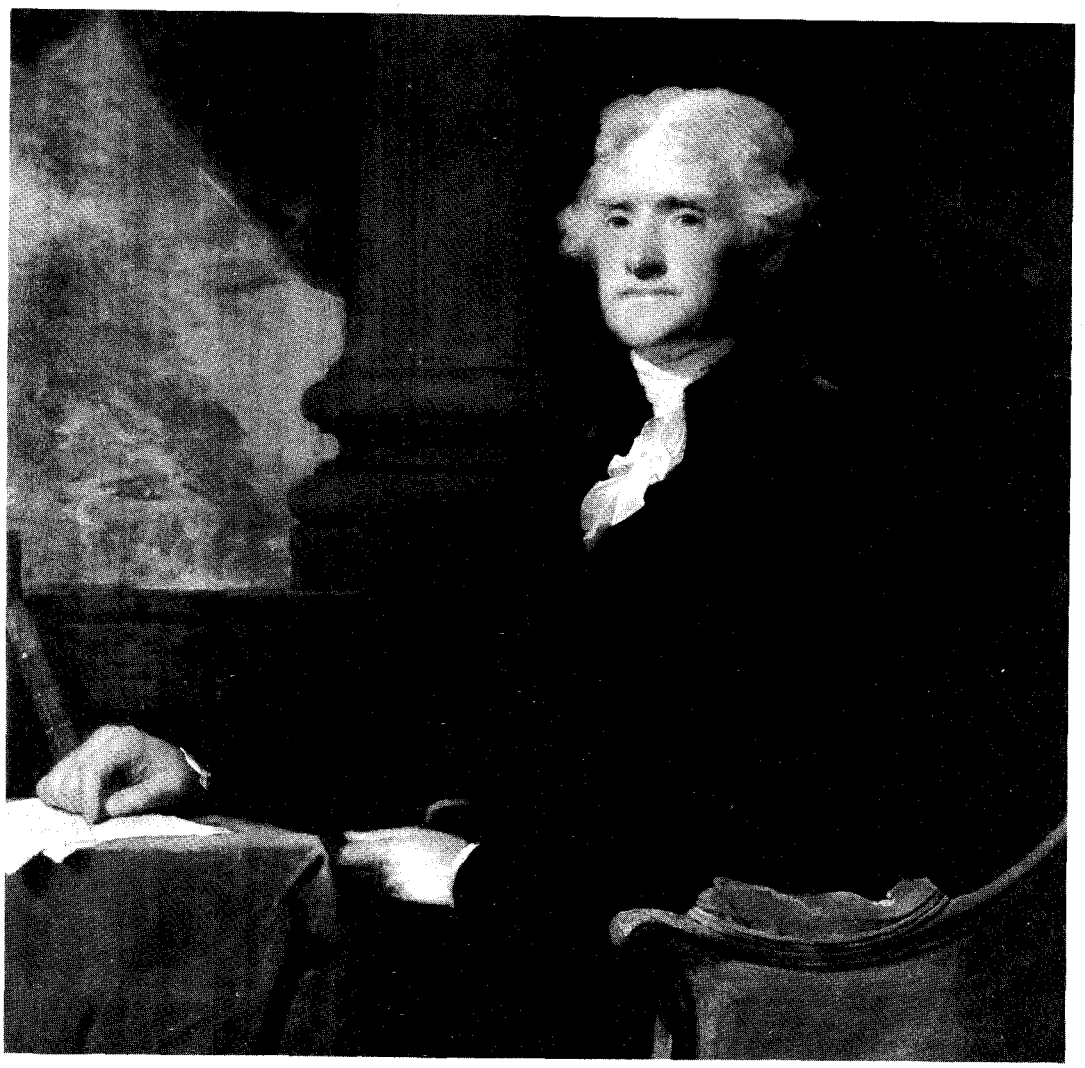

Sir Monticello Mar. 27. 25.

I am a subscriber to the N. American review and understand you are agent for that work in Richmond. it will be more convenient for me to have it furnished from that place because payment there is easier made. I shall be glad therefore to receive it from you and this letter presented to Col? Bernard Peyton of Richmond will ensure your receiving payment from him on my account, once a year or oftener if you chuse. I have received N°. 46. but not N°. 44. and 45. which I shall be glad therefore now to receive. accept the assurance of my respect.

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